

# ANGING SAME?

British Black Artists and  
Visual Arts Organisations  
in the Midlands



# THE CHANGING SAME?

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Carolina Rito

and

Paul Goodwin



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# Introduction

08

This publication brings together the insights gathered during the networking project titled ‘The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands’ led by principal investigator Carolina Rito (Coventry University) and co-investigator Paul Goodwin (University of the Arts London), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. The title of the publication takes inspiration from Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)’s classic analysis of the changing dynamics of Black Music in his 1966 essay ‘The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)’<sup>1</sup>. Baraka famously theorised the improvisational impulse in African American musical forms from, the Blues and R&B to the avant-garde, free-form ‘New Black Music’ that emerged in jazz in the early 1960s. The music changed and adapted over time but the essential elements of Black expression and improvisation forged in the context of White supremacy, racism and exclusion of African Americans from the mainstream, remained remarkably present: ‘the changing same’. Baraka’s dialectical analysis of Black musical expression

1 LeRoi Jones (1966) ‘The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)’ in LeRoi Jones, *Black Music*, Da Capo Press, New York



can also be applied to the very racism and forces of exclusion that framed the changing contexts – socio-cultural and institutional – within which Black creative expression was created – the ‘changing same’ of race and exclusion. The institutional contexts of these forces evolve over time but the end effect on Black people – continued exclusion and racism – remain remarkably constant. This can, in many respects, be seen as a potential context in which to understand many of the dynamics involved in the relations between Black Artists and visual arts organisations in the Midlands and indeed, nationally.

From November 2021 to June 2023, this project focused on the British Black arts in the Midlands and the institutional infrastructures mobilised by Black artists to show and promote their work in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is a period marked by the notable activity of young Black artists in the region – e.g., Blk Art Group (active in 1979-1984) – whose work voiced the deep disappointment with the presence of racist traits in British society. The artworks famously touched on issues of race and racism, white power and privilege, police violence, repression of social justice campaigners, and British cultural diversity and the experience of diasporic communities. In this project, in addition to the artworks and the artists involved, we wanted to focus on the role of the cultural organisations active in this period with contribution to the production and dissemination of Black art. This project went further than simply reflecting on the work done by these groups of artists and the impact of their work on the British art scene and history; instead, this context served as backdrop for the discussion about the role of art galleries and museums in the Midlands. The Midlands is a much-neglected region in studies of Black British art given its historical location as one of the regions where many radical Black art practices first emerged – and their curatorial decisions – in the 1980s.

Simultaneously, the reflection on the past aimed to map the continuities and differences between the struggles of underrepresented groups in the 1980s and today’s institutional approach to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). The urgency of this question has become even more prominent due to the re-emergence of the Black Lives

Matter protests, triggered by the world-wide outrage after the murder of George Floyd in the hands of the police in Minneapolis, the United States, on the 25th of May 2020. The protests helped reignite the call for cultural justice in cultural institutions with regards to audience development, workforce, and programming. In addition, the demands also included the decolonisation of museums and cultural institutions, shedding light on the colonial histories of institutions of display, and the prevailing inequalities affecting the sector<sup>2</sup>. This project looked at the continuities of the issues faced in the 1980s and today through the lens of the role of contemporary art galleries and museums. It did so by looking at the institutional frameworks that enabled the exhibitions and events of Black artists within the context of the systematic underrepresentation of Black artists in the wider institutional infrastructure of British galleries and museums. Therefore, the project took a close look at the cultural organisations who showed work by Black artists in the Midlands in this period, to reflect on these organisations' roles today and how the legacy of the movement was being kept and cared for.

To observe the institutional role of cultural organisations promoting Black art is also a way to address and unpack the lack of such structures – or, more recently, the danger of tokenism. Moreover, to delve into the infrastructures of formal institutions of display – arguably governed by the logics of a white British canon – provides a view of the peripheral networks that operate outside of the formal structures. These peripheral networks are usually more flexible, precarious, vulnerable, and temporary. Throughout the emergence of the Black Arts Movement, groups of artists organised themselves around shared concerns and issues that generated a space in the scene not yet available to these practices. In other words, the recognition achieved by Black art, first and foremost, needs to be credited to the capacity of Black artists to generate their own support structures

2 On the colonial legacies of museums see the work of Tony Bennet, Eileen Hopper-Greenhill and Douglas Crimp. On the demands to decolonise the museums, see the Dan Hicks, Clementine Deliss, Rolando Vazquez.

based on networks of solidarity, intellectual exchange, and peer-to-peer support. Collectives, such as the Blk Art Group, demonstrate how artists came together to better support their work and organise public exhibitions and events. In that way, this project is as much about the formal infrastructures of production and dissemination, as it is about the temporary structures serving new artistic practices, debates, and exchange not available in the scene at that time, despite being highly needed.

To explore these ideas, we invited Black stakeholders with relevant experience in the history of the Black Arts Movement in the 1980s, Black artists and curators, Black community organisers, and regional contemporary art institutions. The organisations included Wolverhampton Art Gallery (WAG), the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (the Herbert), Nottingham Contemporary<sup>3</sup>, and New Art Exchange (NAE)<sup>4</sup>. These organisations were invited as partners of the project for having organised events in the 1980s showing Black art, and/or for more recent curatorial initiatives exploring the legacy of the British Black arts movement. In addition, we have created a working group with Marlene Smith (artist, researcher, and member of the Blk Art Group); Shaheen Merali (researcher and curator); Ian Sergeant (researcher and curator) and Sylvia Theuri (researcher and curator)<sup>5</sup>. We put together a year-and-a-half long programme of closed-door activities involving the partner organisations and the working group to promote a critical debate that could help us understand the ways in which the 1980s have been written and how to actualise those practices today. The activities with these groups were chaired by us – Carolina Rito and Paul Goodwin – and consisted of project meetings with the partner organisations, meetings with the working group members, and workshops with both groups and external

3 Nottingham Contemporary withdrew from the project due to the limited capacity of staff to engage with the activities proposed.

4 For organisations' profiles, see 'Partner Organisations Recommendations'.

5 For complete biographies, see 'Biographies'.

experts to expand on the topics being discussed.

This publication aims to provide an overview of the project and its progress, including the insights from participants, and a series of the recommendations for the cultural sector and funding bodies. The first part of the publication introduces ‘The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands’ including the aims, methods, network activities, outcomes, and participants’ profile. The introduction also reflects on the challenges posed by the pandemic and the economic crisis, as well as the erosion of some of the demands posed to cultural organisations in the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests. The second part of the publication looks at the project’s collaborators and shares their insights about the project, the role of cultural organisations in supporting Black artists today, and the potential directions of follow-up projects based on the lessons that came out of the project. From the working group, we interviewed Ian Sergeant, Marlene Smith, and Sylvia Theuri. From a not-for-profit organisation for Black artists in the region, we were in dialogue with artist Laura Nyahuye, who is the director of Maokwo in Coventry<sup>6</sup>. We also collected statements from the partner organisations reflecting on their recommendations and experience with the project. Finally, the publication concludes with a series of recommendations and reflections based on the lessons learned from the project. The recommendations are aimed at cultural sector organisations; cultural funders; cultural policymakers; researchers in Black studies, museum studies, curating, and cultural policies; and practicing artists and curators. The recommendations were divided in areas of action to reflect the different issues encountered: institutional structures, funding structures, and critical infrastructures.

6 Maokwo is a not-for-profit organisation supporting marginalised, minorities groups (refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants’ artists) and engaging Communities using art as a vehicle. <https://www.maokwo.com/>



# The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands

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## Introduction

‘The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands’ (ROVIBAM) was a networking project led by Carolina Rito and Paul Goodwin between 2021 and 2023. It explored the legacy of the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands and the understudied role of the region’s visual arts institutions in the movement’s history in the 1980s. It is unquestionable that some of the most relevant exhibitions and events organised by British Black artists in the early 1980s happened in the Midlands. Notable examples are the Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton in 1982, and in Nottingham in 1984; and some of the historical exhibitions of the Blk Art Group – a group of Black artists based in the Midlands active between 1979 and 1984 – at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Wolverhampton Art Gallery in Wolverhampton, and the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry. However, the role of the organisations in the movement’s development in that period is not so well studied and known, especially in a context where exhibitions and artworks exposing issues around race and racism in the UK was not a norm. The project enabled us to organise a series of closed-door events and conversations with the partner institutions

and with some of the key artists leading these events in the 1980s, in order to better understand the conditions that led to these collaborations. In a period when the art scene was dominated by a white patriarchal heteronormative canon, we wanted to understand the context in which these institutions programmed group exhibitions by ‘young black artists’, openly criticising the status quo of the British art world and society at large<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, we wanted to understand how these collaborations came about, what support was provided by cultural organisations, and who was involved in the planning of these exhibitions.

The British Black Art Movement is known for its pioneering role for wedding aesthetics with issues about race and racism, exclusion and whiteness, and British identity and colonialism. To study the emergence of this movement is also to look at the conditions that Black artists and organisers generated to enable the production, validation, and dissemination of their work. In short, to create the spaces and the support that were not available for them before. In that way, to look at the context in which these events happened is also a way to examine the informal structures created by these artists and organisers in the periphery of the formal cultural institutions. Despite existing within precarious, temporary, and vulnerable conditions, these informal structures can be said to have radically changed the fabric of the art scene in Britain. These informal structures entailed networks of intellectual, political, and artistic solidarities through which the artists involved would organise cultural events and exhibitions. Moreover, the collaboration between artists, campaigners, academics, educators, and community organisers provides an insight into organisational models that were very different from the ones used by formal institutions of display, i.e., museums and galleries. The work of Rasheed Araeen is illustrative of the cooperation established across the art scene, academia, publishing practices, and activism. After relocating to London, Rasheed Araeen started

1 Herbert Art Gallery & Museum. 1983.  
*The Pan-Afrikan Connection - an  
Exhibition of Work by Young Black  
Artists*. Coventry: Herbert Art Gallery  
& Museum.



publishing art journals in the 1970s, with *Black Phoenix* (1978), and later founded the emblematic *Third Text* (1987). In 2008, *Third Text* was extended with a collaboration in Karachi, India, with *Third Text Asia*. Contemporaneously, Araeen curated two major shows in the 1980s in London, *The Essential Black Art* (Chisenhale Gallery, 1988) and *The Other Story* (Hayward Gallery, 1989) with some of the most representative artists of the movement.

The aim of this project was twofold. On the one hand, the project wanted to look at the role of institutions such as the Wolverhampton Art Gallery and the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in the 1980s in hosting some of the most important exhibitions of the Blk Art Group. On the other hand, it also wanted to explore curatorial and organisational structures emerging from the activism and collaborations set up by Black artists that, despite sitting outside of the formal structures, created new spaces, aesthetics, debates, and models to both produce and disseminate Black art. For these reasons, these informal networks were of no lesser importance, creating vital platforms for the circulation of Black art. As an example, the organisational structure of the Blk Art Group illustrates how collectives were formed to facilitate the production and dissemination of their work, but also to provide mentorship and intellectual exchange essential for the groups' consolidation. As a complementary phenomenon, it was common to see artists moving across different roles, such as organisers, curators, writers, critics, among others. Lubaina Himid famously curates the exhibition *The Thin Black Line* (1985) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, and Marlene Smith takes up the role of assistant curator at the Black-Art Gallery in Finsbury Park, London, also in the early 1980s. Although the figure of the artist-curator is not necessarily new in the 1980s, it is important to consider this phenomenon as part of the history of not only the Black Arts Movement in the UK, but also, the history of British Black curation<sup>2</sup> and Black instituent practices (as in the practices of institution making that combine the legacies of institutional critique with the institutions' social

2 On the history of British Black Curation see Goodwin, Paul. 2021. 'Genealogies of Black Curating in Britain'. British Art Network. 2021. <https://bit.ly/3BDqBuS>

relevance and constant renewal of self-criticism).<sup>3</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that the project did not aim to historicise the 1980s or focus only on this period. There are examples of literature demonstrating the historical context of the BBAM such as *Black Artists in British Art* (Chambers, 1988) and, more recently, *The Place is Here* (Aikens and Robles, 2019), to name a few. In 2016-2019, artist, researcher, and University of the Arts London (UAL) professor Sonia Boyce (British Pavilion, Venice Biennial 2021) led an AHRC funded project titled 'Black Artists and Modernism', which investigated how artists of African and Asian descent in Britain feature in twentieth century art history. ROVIBAM wanted to draw on the events and 'instituent' practices of the early 1980s, to actualise the 1980s movement's motivations in light of today's response of the sector in supporting, promoting and showing Black artists and curators, tackling systemic racism and promoting social and cultural justice. By celebrating the unique legacy of the Midlands, this project aims to draw inspiration on the successes of the 1980s movement and identify current challenges and opportunities

3 On artist-curator and exhibitions curated by artists, it is worth reading Elena Filipovic's edited publication on the topic – Filipovic, Elena, ed. 2017. *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*. Milan: Mousse Publishing. Although there are various examples of artist-curators throughout the last 100 years, it commonly used by conceptual artists. See also Marcel Broodthaers' *Departement des Aigles* (1968-1972). On instituent practices, see Gerald Raunig's 'Instituent Practices - Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming' where he defined them as practices that 'conjoin the advantages of both "generations" of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of parrhesia, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism.' Raunig, Gerald. 'Instituent Practices - Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming'. Transversal Texts, 2006. <https://bit.ly/3pJMgin>

to tackle the prevailing inequalities in the sector and promote a more diverse cultural scene and offer.

## The Networking Programme

The network brought together stakeholders with relevant experience in the history of the BBAM in late 1970s and early 1980s (Marlene Smith and Shaheen Merali) and Black practitioners and researchers in the field (Sylvia Theuri and Ian Sergeant) to form a working group.<sup>4</sup> The project also brought together four partner organisations based in the region with a track record of involvement with and/or interest in the BBAM and its legacy (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Nottingham Contemporary<sup>5</sup>, New Art Exchange<sup>6</sup>). Finally, the project engaged with external experts (e.g., Jagdish Patel) and organisers of Black-led organisations in the region (e.g., Laura Nyahuye) as guest speakers at the project's workshops.

By establishing this network, we wanted to achieve results in three main areas. First, at the level of research and knowledge exchange, fostering research co-operation on Black studies, art and curation between Coventry University, the University of the Arts London, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the visual arts organisations, and the cultural practitioners in the Midlands. Second, it was important to work directly with the visual arts organisations, to raise awareness among directors and staff of the unique and pioneering role of the BAM in the Midlands and its relevance to the British art history. Not least, to understand how the activities in the 1980s helped inform the genealogies of Black curation in the Midlands and the UK. Third, it was important to understand the relationship between the

4 For complete biographies, see 'Biographies'.

5 Nottingham Contemporary withdrew from the project due to the limited capacity of staff to engage with the activities proposed.

6 For institutions' profiles and more information, see 'Partner Organisations Profiles'.

narratives of the past and the current issues affecting the art scene. With one eye on the past and one eye on the future, the project focused on contemporary challenges that Black curators and artists face today in the region with a view to help implement real change beyond tokenism and to increase institutions' commitment to social and cultural justice. To support us with this work and to complement the discussions, we invited colleagues working on the ground with local Black institutions and practices to help identify the needs based on their own experience.

To facilitate this exchange, we planned the programme of activities as closed-door meetings and workshops to enable a safe environment for the discussion of critical topics and ensure confidentiality. Partners and working group members were invited to take part in the initiatives proposed including regular partners' meetings, working group meetings, individual meetings with partner organisations, two workshops, and online posts on the project website. The conversations at the meetings and workshops were the basis for the recommendations we put together at the end of this publication. Partners' meetings took place at least every quarter of the year and were opportunities to check the project's progress, make sure that there was a clear understanding of the project aims, and, finally, that partners could take advantage of the opportunities enabled through the network. Moreover, we used these meetings to discuss in more detail the expectations and the commitment of partners to ensure that the project was allowing institutions to take the time to reflect on the challenges that they faced. These conversations led to issues being further unpacked at the workshops or working group meetings. Alongside the partners' meetings, we established a working group with leading Black experts in the field of curating, art, and research to embed insights from outside and inside academia. This group brought insight from a range of experiences and was invited to provide strategic, scientific, and other advice to the team, drawing on their relevant expertise and experience. The group also ensured the activities aligned with their purpose.

The first workshop took place at New Art Exchange in Nottingham in December 2022, after a year of meetings with

both groups. Being the first time that partners and working group members were meeting in person, we wanted to take the opportunity to hear from the partner organisations on how they were finding their role within the project. Not least, since partners had expressed some issues in relating to a project which aims were to generate a critical debate among participants, instead of the delivery of cultural events and/or final outputs. A project promoting the space and time for organisations to reflect on the work done, identify structural gaps, and discuss the challenges faced, was a shift from what partners were used to and thus presented somewhat of a challenge. This aspect quickly became an important point in the project as this perception explained why partners tended to sit back and expect requests from the leads instead of actively contributing to the conversations.

To help partners move to a more active participation, we invited them to prepare a fifteen-minute presentation on an event that they found radical and transformative in the history of their institutions. In the presentations, partners introduced the event and explained why the event represented a breakthrough for the organisation, how the organisation had benefited from it, or how it was perceived more widely by the local audience and press (if relevant). This event did not have to be a curated event (e.g., an exhibition, talk). Rather, the invitation was for colleagues to think of a situation (programmed or not) that had positively affected the organisation. This could also include an external fact (local and/or national), a moment of difficult decisions, or, even an individual who had left a long-lasting mark on the organisation. To identify the event, the colleagues representing the organisation at the workshop were encouraged to have prior conversations with other staff members from senior managers to curatorial, marketing, and gallery assistant teams. The presentations were followed by an open conversation reflecting on what had been presented and how those examples could suggest directions for change in these organisations (from practice solutions to blue-skies proposals). What was interesting to note was how the chosen examples spoke to how organisations perceive change and transformative events.

New Art Exchange (NAE) and The Herbert Art Gallery

and Museum (The Herbert) reflected on recent events. Saad-Eddine Said, director of NAE, focused on the new long-term vision for a citizen-led gallery to be implemented within the new round of the National Portfolio Organisation funding stream in 2023. Rosie Addenbrook (exhibition and events manager) and Martin Roberts (senior curator) from the Herbert presented the renovation works in the gallery spaces performed by the Turner Prize exhibition in 2021 and the benefits to the exhibition programme. The presentation by chief curator Carol Thompson from Wolverhampton Art Gallery, instead, focused on a past event, i.e., the importance of the *Black Art an' Done* exhibition in 1981. On the project's website, Carol Thompson published the presentation's core ideas and explained WAG's choice:

When I was asked to talk about an event at Wolverhampton Art Gallery that was radical and transformative in the history of Wolverhampton Art Gallery the obvious choice was the exhibition *Black Art an' Done*, in June 1981, now widely recognised as the first exhibition of work by young British Black artists at a major public UK gallery, and a catalyst for change.<sup>7</sup>

Thompson's talk shed light on the relevance of this exhibition in a city like Wolverhampton, and the role of the director David Rogers and assistant curator Brendan Flynn in promoting this opportunity. It demonstrated how this event informed the role of the institution by becoming one of the country's largest regional collections of work by prominent Black artists in the 1980s, e.g., Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith, Lubaina Himid, Chila Kumari Burman.

7 Thompson, Carol. 2022. 'Carol Thompson on *Black Art an' Done* Exhibition – The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands'. *The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands*. 2022. <https://bit.ly/3o9IiiT>

The second workshop took place at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery in January 2023 with the aim to provide insights into the rich informal institutional practices that had supported Black artists and anti-racist movements in the Midlands since the 1960s. We also wanted to open the forum to colleagues who have been leading Black institutions, research, and initiatives in the region and to hear about their views and current concerns. This framework offered an opportunity to expand on the notion of institution and to explore how artists and curators – especially those with limited access to the formal structures of display – generate their own mechanisms of production, validation, and dissemination. These structures, which we are referring to in this publication as informal structures, are most of the times precarious, vulnerable, and short-lived, hence the need to ensure that they are well documented and are not overshadowed by more established structures. Usually driven by an urgent need to create a new space for unacknowledged (or underacknowledged) practices, these structures tend to live off the investment that individuals put into it and, for that very same reason, disarticulate when they are no longer needed, or get adapted to serve new demands.

We started the workshop with a presentation by artist and researcher Jagdish Patel who provided a rich overview of the intersections between the anti-racist movements and socially engaged art strategies in the Midlands between the 1960s and the 1980s. Through extensive research, Patel mapped the informal institutional practices and venues operating across political, activist, and artistic practices. Patel demonstrated that instead of an isolated struggle, the fight against racism is woven through a complex network of social justice campaigners involving diverse areas of society, including the arts. After Patel, we invited Laura Nyahuye to talk about her experience as the director of a Black-led arts organisation supporting Black artists in Coventry, Maokwo. Finally, Ian Sergeant and Sylvia Theuri (two working group members) talked about the exhibition they were curating at Wolverhampton Art Gallery to open on 29 April 2023, showing a selection of works produced by the Blk Art Group (1979-1984) and new commissions. The exhibition explores the story of the Blk Art Group and its relationship with the wider

Black Art Movement of the 1980s. The workshop concluded with a conversation moderated by Marlene Smith about Black contemporary institutional practices in the Midlands and exploring the kinds of new political imaginaries that institutions can/should foster and help create.

To complement these series of events, we offered individual meetings with the partner organisations to make sure that a more private forum was available to discuss institutional specificities and/or confidential information. After a year in the project, these meetings were held at the partner organisations in January and February 2023, and allowed us to discuss areas of work to be explored in follow-up projects and ideas for further research. As these meetings took place towards the end of the project, they offered an opportunity to collate some recommendations from partners; these are reflected in the recommendations section of this publication.

This network has led to several collaborations including the Black Art Day at Coventry Biennial curated by Ian Sergeant in 2021, when Sergeant invited Carolina Rito to moderate a public conversation with Marlene Smith and Keith Piper about the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition at the Herbert in 1983.<sup>8</sup> The recording was part of *The More Things Change...* exhibition at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery from April to July in 2023, featuring the history and the works of the founder member artists of the Blk Art Group. Furthermore, Shaheen Merali gave an online lecture at the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN) (University of the Arts London) in February 2023, a cross disciplinary hub for historical, theoretical and practice-based research in art

8 The recording of the conversation can be found on the Critical Practices Talks website (<https://criticalpracticestalks.com/>) Critical Practices Talks, dir. 2021. Black Arts Movement in Coventry #4 with Keith Piper and Marlene Smith. <https://bit.ly/3pVVc4x>



## Carol Thompson on *Black Art an' Done* Exhibition

When I was asked to talk about an event at Wolverhampton Art Gallery that was radical and transformative in the history of Wolverhampton Art Gallery the obvious choice was the exhibition *Black Art an' Done*, in June 1981, now widely recognised as the first exhibition of work by young Black British artists at a major public UK gallery, and a catalyst for change. As Eddie Chambers' exhibition guide states:

This exhibition of visual art work by five young black artists, is the first of its kind to be mounted in Wolverhampton. It is a stride along the road to 'somebodyness' for the black community. These artists have all struggled to succeed in an adverse situation. We hope they will Keep on Keepin' on.

The acknowledgements began, 'We wish to thank Mr Rogers and all of the staff at Wolverhampton Art Gallery, especially Mr Flynn, for their help.' Mr (David) Rogers (1942 – 1999) was Director of Wolverhampton Art Gallery during the 1970s and early 1980s and he goes down in the Gallery's history as quite a rebel. Mr (Brendan) Flynn, his colleague during that time, has shared many memories of Rogers' pioneering approach to curating. The Gallery's scrapbooks testify to his daring: those from this period are full of newspaper cuttings with articles about Rogers' 'outrageous' acquisitions for the Gallery – particularly his Pop art purchases, which caused several outcries. The Gallery is now renowned for its prestigious Pop collection and Rogers is largely responsible for this jewel in its crown.

Brendan Flynn clearly remembers the time when Eddie Chambers approached the Gallery early in 1981, with his exhibition proposal. This was the first time a Black artist

Thompson, Carol. 2022. 'Carol Thompson on *Black Art an' Done* – The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands'. *The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands*. 2022. <https://rovibam.co.uk/2023/01/09/>

had suggested a show and David Rogers didn't hesitate to say yes. Chambers and Keith Piper were given exhibition space at the Art Gallery in the city centre, and a free rein. Brendan was Assistant Curator at the time, and remembers his role as simply helping to hang works. The curating was left to Eddie.

*Black Art an' Done* was deliberately and powerfully provocative. The catalogue states, 'the group set itself a clear mandate to present work which remained aggressively relevant to the needs of both the Black community, and to those of society as a whole if racism was to be truly taken to task.' It refers to 'seizing time and space in venues which in the past had been far too monopolised by the interests of white middle-classes.' Wolverhampton Art Gallery was taking a bold step in presenting this show but in doing so it truly opened its doors to the Black communities of the city. Claudette Johnson, a student at Wolverhampton Polytechnic at the time, remembers feeling empowered by the exhibition, which included hotly political works; Chambers chose particularly provocative titles such as *God Save The Queen, Immigration, and Anarchy*. For the first time, Johnson and other Black visitors encountered art that represented them and reflected their struggle.

*Black Art an' Done* paved the way for several exhibitions by Black British artists at Wolverhampton Art Gallery over the following decades, and a small number of acquisitions. However, a period of much more significant legacy work began in 2013 when the Gallery was successful in securing major HLF funding through the Collecting Cultures programme. This enabled the Gallery to revisit *Black Art an' Done* and acquire works by members of the BLK Art Group, establishing one of the country's largest regional collections of work by these artists. Wolverhampton Art Gallery now holds important early works by Keith Piper, Donald Rodney, Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith, Lubaina Himid, Chila Kumari Burman, and many others.

This growing collection of Black Art has had a significant bearing on the Gallery's identity and has enabled us to attract crucial funding and partnerships. It played a part in our bid to be one of the British Art Show 9 (BAS9) hosts in 2022 (curators Hamad Nasar and Irene Aristizábal displayed items from the collection in their 'capsule' show in Wolverhampton). It has also been key to our participation in current projects such as the National Portrait Gallery's Citizen UK project, University of Arts London's 20/20 project, and Art 365 Artists' Legacies in the Museum. The Gallery's Black Art collection and its association with *Black Art an' Done* has also attracted Esmée Fairbairn funding to develop community engagement and multi-perspective documentation for these artworks and other collection items.

The legacy of *Black Art an' Done* continues to grow as we build our Black Art collection, provide better access to and interpretation for these works, and create a service which truly reflects Wolverhampton's diverse population. Thanks to a bold decision by David Rogers the aims of Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper et al. continue to be borne out in the work of the Gallery and wider Arts and Culture service. There are many more strides to make along the road to 'somebodiness' for the Black community, but I'd like to believe that we're a little further down the track than we were in 1981.

Wolverhampton Art Gallery will stage a major exhibition in Spring 2023 which seeks to explore and unpack the story of the BLK Art Group and its relationship to the wider Black Art Movement of the 1980s and beyond. *The More Things Change...* runs from 29 April 9 July 2023 and is co-curated by Dr Sylvia Theuri and Dr Ian Sergeant in collaboration with curators at the Gallery.

and design, directed by Paul Goodwin.<sup>9</sup>

As to public outputs, the project has produced this publication, which brings together a summary of the aims and activities, as well as the reflections of the participants involved.

Moreover, it collates the recommendations and areas of work identified throughout the project. The publication was launched at a public event for academic and non-academic audiences at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, in May 2023, to raise awareness of this legacy and share the recommendations. The publication has the ambition to benefit the work of academics in the fields of visual arts, curating and Black studies; and non-academic audience working in the cultural sector and on non-for-profit organisations. The publication will be effectively disseminated to reach funding bodies and policy-makers, e.g., Arts Council England; Contemporary Visual Arts Network; Midlands Higher Education Culture Forum.

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### Complementary Initiatives

The first conversations leading to this project proposal started in January 2020 with the Herbert's former director, Francis Ranford, and Sylvia Theuri. Given the lack of acknowledgement of the role of the BBAM in the region, this project wanted to ensure that Coventry University, the Herbert, and local practitioners were committed to working on the movement's legacy, and to bringing resources together to promote more research in the field. Using the opportunities provided by the Coventry City of Culture (2021), we invited local organisations and young Black artists to discuss how to build an equitable cultural scene and how to draw on the lessons of the BAM. The design of ROVIBAM was made possible by these initial conversations and devised around the priorities shared by the local group. In addition, Carolina

9 The TrAIN Open Online lecture  
*"Critical Decade: Political Black Art  
or Not?"* by Shaheen Merali can be  
found on TrAIN/UAL's YouTube site:  
<https://bit.ly/3Wf2pcl>

Rito put together a series of complementary initiatives to affect research, teaching, and recruitment. First, two PhD scholarships for Black researchers were secured to grow the University's research capacity on the histories of Black art and anti-racism. Second, BAM history was introduced in the Faculty's programme. Finally, new collaborative frameworks were established with local organisations to consolidate the commitment to the legacy of the BAM and equity today.

One of the PhD scholarships was awarded to artist and researcher Jagdish Patel. Patel's research on socially-engaged practices and anti-racism is part of a Coventry University-funded PhD research at the Research Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities initiated in September 2020 and supervised by Carolina Rito (Coventry University), Rajinder Dudrah (Birmingham City University) and Jill Journeaux (Coventry University). The second scholarship was awarded to curator Shaheen Merali in September 2021, and focuses on British Black arts and curation since the 1980s. This scholarship is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Midlands4Cities. As regards Coventry's cultural institutions, Carolina Rito and the Herbert former director Francis Ranford established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities and the Herbert that formalised and furthered the joint commitment to creating opportunities to build a more equitable cultural and university sectors.

At the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Coventry University, Carolina Rito has been collaborating with the Master of Architecture (MArch), to give students the opportunity to carry out a detailed investigation into the Black Arts Movement activities with the support of module leader Sebastian Hicks. In 2021-2022, students were invited to recreate in 3D the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition of the Blk Art Group in 1983 at the Herbert. The recreation of the exhibition was based on the Herbert's archives which document the correspondence between curator of the Herbert in 1983, Patrick Day, and Eddie Chambers and Claudette Johnson. The archive also has the exhibition's ephemera, notes, and floor plans. However, the information about the exhibition provided by the archive is not complete, with artworks missing in the exhibition list and artists'

names absent from the exhibition catalogue. To fill in the gaps of incomplete information, the students interviewed participating artists and audience members of the show in 1983. In addition, the students had the opportunity to work closely with the Herbert's staff and archive curators, and to visit the spaces where the exhibition was held.

In the second iteration of this project (2022-2023), Carolina Rito and Sebastian Hicks were joined by Jagdish Patel. The students worked on the exhibition design and curatorial framework for Patel's research exhibition exploring the intersections of anti-racist activisms and socially engaged art from the 1960s to 1980s in the Midlands. Through this project, students Esther Akinola, Syeda Saumik, and Fawziyah Akhtar explored how the exhibition layout – space design and relationships between objects – is used in curating to convey ideas and concepts; how to design a space for the reception of the objects and materials in display; how to plan the relationships between objects and artefacts in the exhibition; and how to account for multiple exhibition experiences enabled by the exhibition design.

Another important progenitor that fed into ROVIBAM was the above referenced 'Genealogies of Black Curating in Britain' project in 2021. The project consisted of a programme of roundtables, films, and interviews focused on the emergence, strategies, and agency of Black curatorial practices in Britain over the past 40 years, convened for the British Art Network by Paul Goodwin with project curation by UAL PhD research candidate and curator Rahila Haque. Three roundtable panels were convened to address the following questions around Black Curating and its genealogies. Panel 1 with pioneering curators and artists Shaheen Merali, Rita Keegan, and Hassan Aliyu, addressed the emergence of Black curatorial voices in the 1980s and early 1990s when a variety of Black and Asian curatorial practices, projects, and spaces came to light. Questions discussed included: how can we account for the emergence of Black curatorial practices? How to name them? And how did they transform the landscape of British art at the time? Panel 2 unpacked Stuart Hall's concept of ambivalent mainstreaming by focusing on the experiences of Black and Asian curators in institutions with Dr Nima Poovaya-Smith (academic and curator), Gilane

Tawadros (Director, Whitechapel Gallery) and Mark Miller (Tate). The discussion explored Black curatorial experiences and strategies in institutions ranging from Bradford Museums, Iniva, and Tate in response to the questions: how have Black and Asian curators navigated the tricky territory of hostile mainstream institutions in Britain and how have their practices helped to reshape them? Moving beyond a narrow focus on exhibition making Panel 3 – with OOMK collective, Ajamu (artist) and Raju Rage (artist) – focused on recent contexts for understanding Black and Asian curatorial practices in the ‘expanded field’. The panel considered how curatorial collectives, archival practices, independent publishing, and cultural activism are transforming notions of the curatorial and ‘Blackness.’ It addressed the question: how are these practices building on earlier efforts to make space for radical alternatives to the exhibitionary complex in Britain?

## Interference:s BLK Art Group Talk The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum by Jagdish Patel

Patel, Jagdish. 2022. 'Interference:s BLK Art Group Talk The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum by Jagdish Patel – The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands'. *The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands*. 2022. <https://rovibam.co.uk/2022/08/22/interferences-blk-art-group-talk-the-herbert-art-gallery-and-museum-by-jagdish-patel/>.

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In November 2021, Marlene Smith and Keith Piper were in conversation at the Herbert in Coventry. The conversation was part of a range of research activities being undertaken to consider the inter-connections between the lives of the local Black and Asian community, the art institutions, Coventry University, and the local cultural networks in Coventry during this time. Jagdish Patel, a PhD researcher at Coventry University and artist based in Nottingham, shares his thoughts about the conversation.

The problem with asking nice working-class artists about their role in making history is that they remain humble and respond by saying simply, 'we were just kids really'. The work of the BLK Art Group is often described as 'ground-breaking' or 'paradigm shifting'. However, during a recent conversation at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum with Marlene Smith and Keith Piper, we learnt that they were simply living, trying to make some meaning of their lives and learning to be artists (Smith and Piper, 2021). By doing this, and in a relatively short timeframe, 1980-1984, the Blk Art Group transformed the British art scene. The group was initially formed by Marlene Smith, Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Claudette Johnson, and Ronald Rodney.

This time frame was a period of a right-wing turn in British politics, described by the writer Stuart Hall as the 'Great Moving Right Show' (Hall 1979), to describe the conjunctural moment, when particular social, cultural, and political forces came together after the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979. However, history does not move unchallenged. There was a widespread resistance, often led by young people, who respond not to the broad conjectural forces of history but



simply take a small responsibility to interact and respond to things which affect them in their daily lives.

The conversation at the Herbert was part of a range of research activities being undertaken to consider the inter-connections between the lives of the local Black and Asian community, the art institutions, Coventry University, and the local cultural networks in Coventry during this time. As Eddie Chambers mentions in his writings, it is relevant to consider the wider network of references instead of focusing on one decade, to avoid the fetishization of the 1980s (Chambers 2021). When Marleen Smith was asked about the 1980s, she responded by pointing out that the 'formative years were the 1970s'. A period that saw Eric Clapton's racist rants in Birmingham, the television series 'Roots', Rock Against Racism, the war in South Africa, riots in Notting Hill and the difficulties of growing up Black in Birmingham. The years that precede change are times of key importance. If we were to talk to a younger generation of artists in the present day, we would need to think about the events of the past decade, and the impact of growing up under the shadow of climate change, austerity, the gig economy, Brexit, and now Coronavirus.

Learning about the Blk Art Group work is important, especially if you consider that it is only in recent times that we have seen major exhibitions by Frank Bowling, Denzil Forrester, and Lubaina Himid. The broadening of the British art canon has been slow. The opportunities provided to the BLK Art group by Wolverhampton Art gallery and the Herbert were, therefore, ground-breaking. As we learnt from the event, in 1983 at the exhibition at the Herbert titled *Pan-Afrikan Connection*, there were calls for the work to be taken down, which the group resisted as a collective.

This incident came after the first Black Art Convention in Wolverhampton which brought together not just the younger artists, but also artists such as Frank Bowling, Lubaina Himid, and Rasheed Araeen. As Marlene explained, Rasheed came to the conference with an

important message about art and political consciousness, and Black and Asian unity, which ‘made sense to me as an eighteen-year-old, and still makes sense to me’ (Marlene and Piper, 2021). These political discussions took place alongside work about the art. Before these events took place, they rarely talked about the work. As Keith Piper explained ‘when Lubaina started asking and discussing the actual work, we didn’t know what to say, we hadn’t talked about our work before’ (Marlene and Piper, 2021). For Marlene, this was an important moment, because as a young Black woman growing up in Britain, she felt isolated, not just because of the widespread racism, but also at home because ‘they didn’t really understand why I wanted to listen to John Peel’; when she ‘met people who had a similar outlook’ everything changed (Marlene and Piper, 2021).

Meeting Lubaina also made Marlene realise that a broader range of discussions was possible about her work, and she began to think that by making work in isolation she tended to think about the art college as the recipient of the work, rather than the broader community. For Keith, being at Coventry in the art school was refreshing because the tutors wanted students to think about art, politics and the broader cultural work being undertaken in the community. In Coventry, students were encouraged to work both in and out of the institution: ‘being at Coventry made you think about the possibilities of art in and out of the art school... and how art and politics all came from actual lived experience’.

The role of art and lived experience for Black artists was first discussed nearly a century ago, by the African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1926 he delivered a speech at the Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which was later published in the association’s magazine under the title ‘Criteria of Negro Art.’ (Du Bois, 1926) In this article he argued that ‘all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that

whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda'. (Du Bois, 1926). These words echo with such familiarity when we look at the discussions from the BLK art group. The issues of how Black artists make work, for whom they make work, where they place that work, and how they talk about the work, are as relevant now as they were in the 1980s or the 1920s.

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# Interviews by Carolina Rito and Paul Goodwin

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# Ian Sergeant

Ian Sergeant is a curator and researcher. Sergeant is part of the project working group, currently a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage, University of the Arts London and a curator for Coventry Biennial.

## Carolina Rito

Paul and I have had the pleasure to have you on board this project as part of the working group and as contributor to the workshops. The project brought people together to explore the institutions' initiatives around Black art and curation. When we first started thinking about this project, the main aim was to bring key cultural partners and experts in the region together to explore these aspects in detail. Of course, these debates were affected by what happened in 2020 with the terrible killing of George Floyd, gaining a different momentum and timeliness. Our first question is about how you think that institutions have been dealing with the legacy of the Black Arts Movement and care for this legacy today?

## Ian Sergeant

I would describe the institutional response since the 1980s until the current times as being sporadic and uneven, rather than it being part of ongoing day to day engagement with artists, artists' work, and practice. I see it still as being a project that is about

diversity rather than artists being treated within the overall programme of what they are doing as curators. I would say that so much more needs to be done.

I would like to go back to one of the things that you started out with saying about the response since 2020 and how the impact of 2020 became quite a defining momentum period. I would say that it should not take people to die; people should not have to die for people to sit up and listen to them. It should not take people dying across the way in the United States, or people dying in terrible conditions under the pandemic, for people then to respond, 'oh, yeah, this is terrible'. We would have to go back and say, why then? Why did this momentum form after George Floyd's murder and the pandemic? What was it about that period, that time, that made institutions think that had to do something? Why did it not happen before? This happens after all the things that had been done, all the work, all the work of artists, all the imploring of communities subsumed to racism. However, it then required

somebody to die. Joy Gardner died. Clinton McCurbin died. Colin Roach died. Stephen Lawrence died. All these others died but there were not these protests or institutional responses.

Institutions have eventually responded with some kind of project, but it never becomes ingrained into the institution. Diversity should not be treated as an add-on. Instead, it should just be part of how we are as human beings. We should be treating people equally, it is a societal thing and, therefore, an issue for institutions to keep in mind. They need to think of their infrastructure in line with the way in which they think of their politics. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be part of their day to day and thinking. So, there's a lot of catching up to be done because of years of neglect.

Another aspect that became quite evident during our conversations with the partner organisations was the sense of guilt. They need to work out how to deal with that sense of guilt. People seem to be feeling as if we are making a personal attack on them. However, it is not personal, it is not about 'you'. And they need to take themselves out of that. It is not about them. It is about the institutions they represent. It goes down to when we are talking about racism in society, when we are talking about slavery, when we are talking about these heavy, heavy subjects, people always think, 'but I did not do it.' Again, it is not about the individuals but about the system we are part of, a structure that continues to have this thing, continues to support this thing or be complicit in this thing. These things need to be untangled.

Something that you said to me, Carolina, a long time ago, before 2020, is that we need to move beyond this project-by-project dealings around Black arts practice. We need to move from beyond the project. However, we continue to find ourselves in that same situation. I

believe we need to ask ourselves why. Why is it that we cannot do this as part of the day to day of all the institutions?

CR

I would like to pick up on something you mentioned about diversity. I am very curious to hear more about this idea of how diversity – and the way it has been institutionalised – sometimes gets in the way of the work that institutions should be doing. By this I mean that it seems to me that the diversity agenda – or in other words, equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) – is how institutions are translating the work, the work of unpacking and 'undoing' systemic racism. I wonder what this translation into EDI guidelines is doing. Moreover, it seems to me that there is a danger of equating diversity with Black art instead of understanding that Black art is and has been for a long while part of the aesthetic canon.

When institutions talk about the great work they are doing, based on the project-by-project approach, is seen as an aside to the 'actual' exhibitions, to the 'actual' experts that are invited to curate. Why is this separation there? Is it because of funding is structured? In our working group meetings, we talked a lot about the question of funding and how it really sets up the terms in which institutions then go about doing their work. But I wonder if this idea of diversity has been misunderstood, or is a perpetuation of systemic racism in other terms.

IS

Yes. That is exactly what I meant. There is a division. When work is collected it is because there is an opportunity under the umbrella of diversity. But work should be collected because it is good work and is important work to have within the institution. You should be falling over yourself to get that work. And that strategy should be clear when we look at the collecting policy of an

organisation. If the thinking as curators, as collectors, as an institution is about finding the best work, that speaks to, about and for British art, you should not need a prompt to get Black art because it should already be on your radar. However, institutions seem to be thinking of Black art as some kind of equality and inclusion agenda.

### Paul Goodwin

I wanted to pick up on what you mentioned about individual curators sometimes identifying or feeling guilty and guilt within institutions – a feeling as though somehow they have been personally implicated. And I wonder whether that raises the question of whiteness in institutions. Is there anything that you might want to say?

### IS

This idea of diversity also kind of plays a role because for some institutions, their take on diversity is only gender. Recruiting white women is a synonym for diversity. It is diverse in terms of gender, but it should be more intersectional. I worked in institutions where I was the only Black male in predominantly white female teams, and they were presenting themselves as being a diverse institution. I think that is where, for some institutions, the idea of that accusation then of around whiteness is like, ‘well, look at our workforce, we have got all these women’, but probably a lot of those women come from quite privileged middle-class backgrounds, not necessarily from the working class. If we bring in people of South Asian or African Caribbean backgrounds into those positions, how many of those are full time permanent positions? They are usually quite short-term positions to work on small projects that are not across the whole programme.

### PG

Our next question is about how institutions have responded to

what happened after the killing of George Floyd and the debate around decolonisation and diversity. Decolonisation seems to be the new term for diversity. How do you see institutions responding to the critique of underrepresentation in their workforce, the boards, programme, audiences? Can you think of any specific examples in the region?

### IS

I would again say that a lot of the institutional response is out of guilt and is compartmentalised, instead of institution wide. And at the same time, I would also say that there have been some important appointments in the last few years. For instance, you think of Co-CEOs Sara Wajid and Zak Mensah (Birmingham Museums), Co-Artistic Director Corey Campbell (The Belgrade, Coventry), Doreen Foster (appointed director of Warwick Arts Centre in 2018), Zoé Whitley (appointed director of Chisenhale Gallery in 2020), Melanie Keen (appointed director of Wellcome Collection in 2019). There is a problem there that we can still count these people and note ‘there are these people in these positions’. Some of the institutions are responding and putting people into these positions of importance.

You want them to be able to make the important decisions that are for the benefit of the institution that then filters through to the boards. The boards of these institutions are also where a lot of the problems lie, because those boards are historically white, middle aged, and male, and those boards need to be, again, representative of society. This is what also needs to happen because a lot of the ideas that the thinking and the development of the institution then moves between the boards.

I am on the board of Vivid Projects, a non-profit company supporting media

arts practice and artist-led exhibition space Ort Gallery. The board is fully representative. When I look around the room, I see how diverse and forward thinking the organisation is and it has that kind of energy. Diversity should be because it is the right thing to do. Some people need to take a step down now and go, 'it is time that I gave up my seat, my space, and bring in some new ideas'. The boards should be actively out engaging, talking to people, going to different kinds of events, and seeing what is out there; they should be engaging, reading, and researching. A lot of the time, boards are not very active in that way. You do not seem to see them at events talking to people, talking to the audience, and getting a sense of what people think about them as an institution.

Also, institutions are reliant on external organisations to assist them with engaging with their communities. It means that some of them do not have the internal knowledge. If there is a Black event happening or South Asian event, they will go and find a South Asian organisation to work with on this project. They will do the project and then you never see them again after that project. So again, that knowledge gets lost. They are not building up that knowledge. They are not internalising that knowledge. And how you do that is through your staff. It is through your own staff's knowledge. What do they know about the communities – their local communities and the wider communities? They need to have that internally as well as having knowledge of what exists outside. They then also need to be inviting them to everything to help build up a trust. When Birmingham Museums Trust did their opening last year and they commissioned a number of arts organisations to create these short-term installation projects as part of the Commonwealth Games, it was great. They probably had some of their best audiences, some of the most

diverse audiences, because a lot of that work was about the communities that spoke to the people.

In short, I have been involved in numerous projects, numerous reinventions of this wheel now called diversity. And I am sure for yourself, Paul, you have had this same kind of churning. And the problem goes back to this idea that we are just doing projects. It means then that the structure is in denial because we see that the structures are part of the institution and still in denial about its short-termism, about how they should be addressing this kind of construction of race. This construction of race within society is still this thing that sticks in the throat of society and until they can address it head on and stop wringing their hands with guilt and say, 'let's have an open conversation about this', you need to do some healing yourself as a society. Society needs to heal, and it has not dealt with some serious things that happened generations ago.

CR

Am I right to say that you have suggested a tenure for leadership roles in our organisations. I wonder if this is something that could serve as a recommendation. I know this happens in the Netherlands for publicly funded institutions. Appointed directors of cultural institutions are offered a five-year contract. Is this something that you see as a positive measure that could be implemented to allow a renewal of ideas, perspectives, frameworks, and networks in publicly funded institutions?

IS

Yes. That would make a lot of sense because from outside the institution, from a freelance position, from an independent position, I am in a precarious situation, so I am constantly looking for the next thing. I would say that if somebody knew that they had five years to do the work, they would



perhaps then set some achievable goals, some short-term, and then perhaps build in some things that they could hand on or have things that could be picked up by that next person. That would be an interesting way to view some positions and certainly on boards. I think when organisations bring their boards together, that should be something that they would be looking to do that after a period of time that that person should be looking to step down to bring in some new voices. A fixed contract is certainly an interesting thing to consider for publicly funded institutions.

### CR

On a slightly different topic, I wanted to focus now on structures that sit outside of the formal institutions of display and how they have contributed to advance new practices and respond to new urgencies. As part of our discussions, specifically in the working group meetings, we have extensively explored this idea that some of the very important work is happening outside of the formal institutions. Just to clarify that by formal institutions we mean those structures that secure long-term funding from their respective Arts Councils (e.g., National Portfolio Organisations). We were also interested in thinking of institutions or forms of instituting that are less formal, smaller-scale, and a lot of the times setting the tone in terms of supporting emergent practices and responding to more urgent issues. In your view, what are the projects currently doing this in the region?

### IS

I did a talk last week at the Birmingham School of Art as part of their night school programme and I was in conversation with a filmmaker called Yonatan Tiruneh. Yonatan is of Ethiopian descent and lives in Birmingham. He is a filmmaker, photographer, and is studying film at the Birmingham Film

School. He made a new film with some support from the Commonwealth Games. We are screening his film as well as another film by a Birmingham filmmaker, Heather Powell, called *Paradise Circus*, made back in the 1980s. The latter is an important film about architecture in the city. And I chose that film alongside Yonatan because his film was about a space called the Tower Ballroom, which is by Edgbaston Reservoir. It has been demolished, but it was a space where historically people would gather for nights out for events. Yonatan's film was about the people that were using that space and what it meant to lose this space.

The reason why I bring up Yonatan was because during this conversation he was always saying that the work is not yet finished. And then the title, when it's introduced said, *COD: Children of the Diaspora*. I asked, what is Children of Diaspora? He said, 'well, it is this collective that I am bringing together of young makers, people from different walks of life to come together with their ideas, with their creativity'. And I thought this is beautiful; out of this film that he put together he was also creating a collective. And this idea of the children of the diaspora is a beautiful idea because it kind of speaks to that. We are from here, but we are from elsewhere. So as much as being from here, we have our views and our site is that way. It is not just this narrow view. That was one of the beautiful things that came out of that conversation.

I also wanted to mention Maia who is doing amazing things and bringing this language around, this important language of liberation. That is what they are talking about, this language of liberation to free themselves up, to be free of the institution, and be free to think, to imagine and to create.

Also, there is this self-liberation that

needs to happen, and that happens through the ability to bring in people that think that way and not in a narrow position. I think it is people that sit outside those institutions that are doing that because the energy potentially gets sacked, and the ideas get institutionalised. But people must play this game as well, where you have to learn the language of what is being said and understood in there so that you can then go out and do that and speak truth to power. Those are the kind of organisations and collectives that are doing that. Although Black Obsidian are not from this region, I wanted to mention them because they speak of this way of practice, mode of practice, of thinking, and the recognition of where they are from. If you think about sound system culture, of what it was about back in the day, it was about people coming together to foster that creativity. At the beginning, they were not even thinking of themselves as being a collective, but they were formed under this banner and they were raising this money to get their sound system, to buy the amplifier, to build the speaker box. They are carrying on that idea, and then we see it manifesting in this new way, which is really interesting.

These are the kind of things that I am seeing, which is heartening and exciting.

PG

Our last question is about the history of Black curation. If you were to think about the history of Black curation in the UK, what would be for you some of the most significant events or moments that mark that history, either in the region or outside the region?

IS

I would say that the 80s, because it is something that Kobena Mercer talks about, this idea of the disconnect and where, say, the Blk Art Group had come from and that idea of the not knowing. And that not knowing perhaps goes

back to the 60s with the Caribbean arts movement founded by John La Rose, Kamau Brathwaite and Andrew Salkey in 1966. They were doing some important things. And because out of that, then you had New Beacon Books, and then you start to have some of those events, exhibitions and publishing the *Savacou* journal. Self-publishing, I would say, was an important precursor that perhaps not many people know about. Then, we moved to the 1980s and that is when you have the Blk Art Group. What they were doing from 1979 as young Black artists up to 1984.

And it is that idea of them as self-starters, exploring the idea of the not knowing. And what I am seeing in the research that I am doing for this forthcoming exhibition (*The more things change...*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 2023) is that they took it upon themselves to curate, to organise, to bring these things together. When you see the innards of how an exhibition like the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* happened at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in 1983, it is amazing. If you visit the archive at the Herbert, you will find how they organised the exhibition, you can read the letters between Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper and Claudette Johnson and the curator Patrick Day. Then you start to see how these other people fold into this conversation. For instance, Lubaina Himid is somebody that Chambers references as somebody that the gallery needs to talk to because they are on this path. Lubaina is brought into the fold with the organising *Into the Open* in 1984 at Mapping [Art Gallery]. And that is a really important moment with Pogus that then tours from Sheffield to Newcastle, and Nottingham. At some point, this group brings into the conversation somebody like Rasheed Araeen, who is such an integral part of this conversation that shakes up our understanding of Blackness.

Then, there are things happening at

the same time such as *Ten.8 Magazine*, *Artrage*, *Black Phoenix*, *Third Text*. These are the spaces where that critical dialogue was happening. We still need to find those spaces. It is the case of the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition, and *Black Art An'Done*. These spaces also include the writings of Rasheed Araeen, Lubaina, Gilane Tawadros, Eddie Chambers, Keith Piper, Marlene Smith. Paul [Goodwin], you were writing and engaging with this language, critiquing this language and the struggle that was happening. But it needs to be much more visible in that regard. Artists like Sonia Boyce are very important in terms of practice.

We have to talk about the importance of curation because so often we talk about it being within an institutional space. However, we need to look at what was happening on the streets, in the public space. For instance, events such as the Notting Hill Carnival were important spaces for of culture to exist before it became commodified. I may have stopped going to Notting Hill Carnival in 2001, but it was an important space for some of that to happen. Isaac Julian's film explored some of the aspects coming out of this event, such as the juxtapositions between carnival, sexuality, and identity.

Finally, I wanted to mention Vanley Burke hanging his work in barber shops, in community spaces, in churches, where the everyday is happening. These are very important curatorial decision because it brings the work to those being represented.

CR

Thanks. I really like your expanded understanding of curation, where you also include publishing practices, the Carnival, and public art. The critical debates were not happening in the main institutions. They were popping up and finding conditions to emerge elsewhere. These spaces are key in the mapping of

Black curatorial practices.

IS

Can I just say that I am really grateful and thankful for, first, meeting you Paul. It has taken a while, so I have to say big thanks. And you have always been somebody that I have looked up to and gone out of my way to look at your work and being influenced by. So I have to say a big thank you. Carolina, thank you for involving me from 2019 in terms of our conversations and giving me a platform or a space to have these tussles. And it is not about being right and wrong, it is about being able to have the conversation. So that is what is exciting about these things that you are doing.

CR

Thank you both. It has been great to be in conversation. I think what we try and do is just to generate the opportunities and be able to continue having these debates. And you have been incredibly generous, and you have been, I think, incredibly empathic with everything we have been putting on the table and have really engaged intellectually with those questions.

# Marlene Smith

Marlene Smith is an artist and curator, and one of the founding members of Blk Art Group. She is a member of the project working group and currently part of the *Leader: Black British Art Research Group/British Art Network*, a Tate initiative.

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Carolina Rito

The project is looking at the Black Arts Movement legacy in the Midlands (UK) and trying to think about how institutions in the region, especially those that have some sort of relationship with the movement, are today caring for this legacy. In a way, the question was also how these institutions have integrated this history as part of their institutional identity and remit. Moreover, and considering what happened in the last three years, we also wanted to discuss how these institutions have been tackling systemic racism in the cultural sector and in society at large. We wanted to know how you see the role of these organisations in engaging with the artworks and the artists involved in the 1980s, and, moreover, how this is reflected in their programme today.

Marlene Smith

I think it's a very mixed picture. If you look at the region, an institution like Wolverhampton Art Gallery, for example, has made a specific effort to collect Black artists work, and they

did so relatively recently. I think their collection is probably ten years old now, so that is relatively recent. They have made a structured decision to acquire work and to show it, whereas an institution like Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries, for example, already had certain works in their collection. I know that they have made an effort to collect Donald Rodney's work, for example, more recently. I think the one that is lagging behind in terms of collecting is the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum. They have Gavin Jantjes' work in their collection, which they have had since the late 1980s. But, as far as I understand it, they have not made any kind of structural decision about their collection and how they want the collection to reflect the relationship between Black artists and society, let alone have it relate back to their own pivotal moments with the Blk Art Group in the 1980s. So, I think it is a very mixed picture if you look at the region as whole.

I think that these organisations do different work in terms of what they

are programming. Wolverhampton Art Gallery, again, they have got an Anwar Jalal Shemza's exhibition at the moment, and they're going to be doing a public programme with that. The Blk Art Group is going to have a show there in April [2023]. I don't know what the rest of their programme is for the year, but it feels as though they are making a structured effort to engage with that legacy. Whereas in Birmingham, the museum has made a very bold statement because their two directors are Black. That is unprecedented. I cannot think of any other institution, even in London, that bold. But it remains to be seen what effect that new leadership is going to have on the programme. We are still waiting to find out. They have only been in post for a year, I think, and the Birmingham Museum and Art Galleries is undergoing some major changes, but we will not know what those are until they reopen their premises.

**Paul Goodwin**

Can I follow up on that first question? What are your thoughts on the awareness of these institutions of the value of the legacy of the Black Arts Movement. You have mentioned Wolverhampton taking it on quite frontally in their programme. But I wonder whether you think these institutions as a whole understand the importance of the Black Arts Movement and what it achieved and whether they value it as part of what they do? Do you think that they are considering it in terms of their history, but also how they move forward?

**MS**

I would hazard a guess at no. I think

that they are still learning, and I think that the scholarship around what the movement meant in the moment to what it means today is still being written, is still being gathered. And the institutions that I have talked about do not have a reputation for being on the front foot when it comes to new thoughts about art. They are on the back foot. They work after the fact, not before the fact. And I think that is a frustration. For me personally, that is a frustration. The way that they are progressing feels a bit leaden footed because they do not have the scholars in house, and they are not necessarily making partnerships with scholars outside of their institution. I think that is the way that they could make more of their collections and their history. This project is an opportunity for them to do that, but it is limited in its scope in terms of what it will do for their programme. However, this project offers the mechanisms. They could identify scholars who are well versed in this legacy and work with them to come up with new ideas for how to show the work and how to contextualise the work.

**CR**

Yes, absolutely. That is very interesting. I believe that these institutions could greatly benefit from collaborating with universities and bring that expertise to support the work. These were some of the discussions we had as part of this project, especially with Wolverhampton Art Gallery. Organisations lack the expertise and time to be able to delve into, for instance, their collection in a different way, in a critical manner. The collaboration with research institutes at universities could bring those resources and build capacity within their teams.

Unfortunately, we do not see that coming through as often as we would like. Perhaps in London it is a different context.

PG

The Blk Art Group research project has done a lot of amazing work to keep this legacy alive, also in collaboration with institutions. Have you observed or are you aware of more informal instituting practices that play into this issue in the region? By instituting practices we mean organisations and/or collectives outside of the formal institutions, outside the main institutions. Are there other practices or smaller organisations that have kept that legacy alive?

MS

I took part in a talk with Gilane Tawadros [director of Whitechapel, London] and a couple of other Directors of what I would call informal organisations. One was Lisa Anderson who is interim Managing Director of the Black Cultural Archives. The other was Amahra Spence, who is founding director of Maia Group in Birmingham, which is working to establish a hotel that will have residencies for Black artists. I am sure there are more, but Maia is one to watch in the region. Also, Jade Foster has started the Black Curators Network. I do not know how they work, but I know that they are leading on it.

CR

One of the things we wanted to ask you has to do with the political changes in the last three years. These changes are particularly relevant because when we started discussing this project, it was before the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. The focus of the project was very much the same, but it is important to acknowledge that because of the events in 2020 and their impact on policy and agendas, the project also gained a different relevance. How do you see the

demands for change affecting the visual arts institutions, especially in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests? We could argue that the demands to tackle systemic racism and decolonise institutions left them with no choice but act. After that momentum, how do read the situation now in 2023?

MS

I think that what happened with Black Lives Matter and the aftermath of that was that institutions, like you said, were put on the spot and were being called out for the institutional racism, and most of them made some kind of response in public. But I hope I am not doing them a disservice by saying that a lot of that was very much under the surface. It was a bit like Black History Month which came a bit earlier. There was a sort of scrabble to get Black artists into their programme, but that scrabble, that speed, that urgency meant that they did not do so in a considered way. I am very much aware that some institutions' profiles changed in that they were showing all black work. But how they show it and how they contextualize it is something that needs to be really thought about and framed in a way that will encourage audiences to engage with the work. I feel that that is where they will let themselves down a bit.

CR

How could institutions improve?

MS

One of the things that they could do is to take their time, to do the work more slowly and to work in collaboration where there is a lack of knowledge to acknowledge the Black scholarship that is around us. There is significant Black scholarship now that should not be ignored. In the 1980s, when I was active, institutions could get away with saying that they did not know who the Black artists were and that they did not know any Black curators. But we are in a very

different situation now where there are dozens of Black curators, most of whom have some solid scholarship behind them. They have been educated to MA and PhD level, they have the resources to support scholarship in the public realm, and they are keen to do so. I think that the institutions got into a competition with each other about who could get Black art in their programme first, and they scrambled towards getting that representation. However, that did not do them any service and did not service the Black art scholarship that is so vital because without the scholarship, the intervention is easily forgotten. It just comes and goes. And if you were not there, you missed it. And it does not have any longevity, it does not have any lasting presence, any scope for future scholarship.

Also, in galleries like Wolverhampton and the Herbert Gallery, the people in the senior roles tend to stay there longer, and they do not make way for the younger generation, the younger white generation, let alone black people. That is a problem throughout the sector – people sitting in senior jobs for decades. We should, as a sector, establish different rules so that people do not stay for longer than five years. I think that five years is plenty of time to put your mark on an institution. If you are staying for twenty years, you are making it impossible for other people to contribute, to have a new conversation. Contemporary art moves much faster than that. The practice is moving, so the institutions need to try and keep up with it. With smaller galleries, not necessarily the municipal galleries, but the independent spaces, they are a bit more fleet of foot. For instance, Eastside Project has had the same director since its inception and the same with Grand Union. They have had Cheryl Jones from the beginning. Although I respect both of those curators for what they are doing, I still do think that it is time for them to do something. A good

example is Lois Keidan, director of Live Arts Development Agency (LADA), who decided that they had been there long enough and then the board took the bold decision to appoint two Black co-directors [Barak adé Soleil and Chinasa Vivian Ezugha].

I do think that institutions got scared by being called out in the 2020 post George Floyd. But they need to cut deep into the fabric of the institution and make changes that are going to have a lasting, productive effect. Having one solo show or one survey show is not going to do that.

PG

You have to be more structural. This was one of the aspirations of this project, the idea of building a network and getting the institutions to talk to each other. But as we have seen, many of them are either too busy or they do not want to be part of it.

CR

We wanted to focus on a slightly different topic now and think a bit more about the understudied history of Black curation in UK. One of the things we discussed in our meetings throughout the project was how some of the artists trained as artists in the late 1970s but in the 1980s found themselves moving across different roles. They would continue doing their practice but find themselves also fulfilling the role of curators, organisers, etc. You are a brilliant example. Not only the organisational work as part of the Blk Art Group, but also your role as assistant curator at the Black Art Gallery in Finsbury Park, London. We were interested in knowing about your motivations to work across different roles. Did you feel the need to do it? We have been interested in exploring how the curatorial practices that emerged from the Blk Art Group can help to write the genealogy of Black curation in the UK. How can we look at these practices

not only in terms of the Black arts but also part of Black curation?

MS

I joined the Blk Art Group in 1982. The group organised its own exhibitions, even though we were working in institutions like the Herbert Gallery and Museum [Coventry], Ikon [Birmingham] and Wolverhampton Art Gallery. It was a group that decided what was going to be shown and where it would be shown. I think a history of Black curation would need to include the Blk Art Group, but equally each member of the Blk Art Group. I think apart from Claudette, although this may have changed more recently, each member has had experience as a Black curator. Donald Rodney for example worked at the Ikon on a scheme that was funded by the Arts Council England. Eddie Chambers famously has gone on to do many exhibitions, for instance, in the 1980s, he was doing group exhibitions like *Black People and The British Flag*. He went on to do solo exhibitions and identifying of artists who potentially have been overlooked, bringing more critical attention to their work. Keith Piper and I worked together on *The Image Employed*, an exhibition at the Cornerhouse in Manchester and Keith has done several important shows. For instance, the 1992 multi-venue project *Trophies of Empire*, curated by Bryan Biggs and Keith Piper, in collaboration with Arnolfini, Bristol, Hull Time Based Arts and Liverpool.

The reason that I say that *Trophies of Empire* was an important show is because what happens with Black curation that I find exciting is that it creates a context for which Black artists then make new work. That is something that when you look at Black curation across the 1980s, right up until now, you will find that the space is safe for them and they will try things that they would not otherwise have tried to do. I think when you look back at *The Thin Black Line*, for example, a lot of the work that

was made specifically for that exhibition and for that corridor space. I was listening to Sonia Boyce on Desert Island Discs (BBC Radio 4) and the presenter asked her specifically about the piece of work that she made for *The Thin Black Line* (Institute for Contemporary Art, 1985). And she did say that she made that piece for that show. I did the same. I think most of us did the same.

One of the important things about Black curation is that it calls for new work in a way that other curators just have not done for us. The work of Lubaina Himid and Maud Salter is very important. They both did seminal pieces of work in terms of curating. I must remember people like Shaheen Merali. He was doing amazing work with a very small budget in London. I am currently taking part in a book production called *Shining Lights*, which is looking at Black British female photography and there are so many women who organised exhibitions that are being heralded by this particular publication. Joy Gregory, Ingrid Pollard, Maxine Walker organised exhibitions. Ingrid Pollard just co-curated an exhibition that is opening in the next couple of days, so she has not stopped doing that.

It is easier to find Black artists that have not done any curation than it is to name everybody that has. In terms of the reasons why there was a feeling of compulsion, I believe that as there was the need to make the work, there was the need to make sure it was seen. One of the saving graces of having a specifically Black space is that you do not have to make the argument about why a particular artist is being highlighted, because there is already a commitment to Black work and Black audiences. I found that the experience of working at the Black Art Gallery is very different to the experience of working at say, Cornerhouse where Keith and I were invited to co-curate an exhibition.



On this occasion, we came up with the theme, interviewed the artists, decided on the line-up and where things were going to go in the space. We tried for it to be a thematic show rather than a survey show, but it felt like a survey. The reason why it feels like that is because there is one opportunity to show work in the white institutions. You therefore feel obliged to show lots of it to say to the curators and to the art world, 'look at all these talented Black people that are not being shown elsewhere'. Lubaina talks about *The Thin Black Line*, the show with 11 women taking part, she said she wanted those 11 women to be like 111. That is what she says about choosing that number of people to show in that tiny little space. She did a beautiful job. It looked purpose built and it was because we all did new work.

CR

I think the new commissions are something to be added to the recommendations. It really supports the production and does not expect people to be doing the work without access to the resources. Structurally speaking, this is a very important contribution that institutions can provide because they have also the budgets to do that.

PG

I liked this idea of Black curation providing a safe space. As you say, it is providing a kind of context of care. Black artists working within white institutions were not subjected to care historically, you were subjected to precarity and anxiety. It was made clear to you that you were being invited into this one chance, and you had to get it right, otherwise you were out. To create our own spaces was an act of care. It is such an important way of understanding Black curating and genealogies of Black curating as being about opening up solidarity.

# Laura Nyahuye

Laura Nyahuye is an artist, storyteller, creative visionary, and founder of Maokwo – a migrant-led organisation using art as a form of activism to bring about positive change based in Coventry.

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**Carolina Rito**

Maokwo was born of your experiences as an artist from Zimbabwe who came to the United Kingdom in 2002. Maokwo is a response to a problem, to the lack of support, to the things missing within the cultural context where you were working. Today, it is an organisation providing opportunities for artists from underrepresented backgrounds, to explore and develop their creativity. How did Maokwo emerge?

**Laura Nyahuye**

Going back to 2004, I enrolled at Coventry University as a mature student, and in 2006 I met Gogo Mabel, who was originally from Zimbabwe. She later became like an adopted mom for me. She encouraged me for three years to get involved in the community and arts. Initially I resisted because I was dedicated to establishing myself as an artist in my own way, especially in the fashion industry. However, for three years, she did not give up. Finally, I gave in and then I started volunteering at the Coventry Refugee Centre in 2007 as part of a placement. This was a

great decision because I could see the power that art had in helping me and a group of women from refugee and asylum-seeking backgrounds. Creativity was helping me with my own personal challenges. This experience was very useful because it took me out of my own challenges.

This is where my journey started, within the arts and community. Later, we started a community group with Gogo in Hillfields. It ran from 2007 to 2013. We were working with women and using art as a tool to give them confidence, to have a space where they can just open up and be themselves. This created very positive results. That was a space where I could witness the power of art, of being creative and bringing people together. This was my training ground, because I got to understand Coventry, the community of Coventry, the organisations, the council, etc. All of this was volunteering. It was not a formal organisation where we were getting funding, but I loved it so much.

In 2017, we created Maokwo, an

organisation that is looking at young people, women, and migrant artists. I understood that we all had something in common and there was a lot to do to guarantee that these people were having the same opportunities.

CR

One of the main focuses of Maokwo was to support those who were coming to this country and feeling like the cultural values that they were bringing were not necessarily appreciated or valued in the same fashion. Maokwo is working with people to make sure that people do not lose hope in the things they bring and that they are able to pursue a career in the field without feeling undermined. The work you have done with the Young Leadership Programme was extraordinary. So many artists that came out of this programme are now doing BAs and MAs in London, the Netherlands, being invited to participate in the British Art Show, and so on and so forth.

Paul Goodwin

To follow up on what Laura was saying, it is fascinating how art was central to working with the community and your experience as an artist. I just wondered to what extent, during that time when you were setting up Maokwo, were you aware of the Black art movement in the city and the region. Were you aware of that work? Were you involved?

LN

I was not aware of BAM since it was not the type of research/topic we looked at during my university years. I would say that I was not aware of the local art scene as such. One of the first places I went to in Coventry was the Art Space. It was very difficult to relate, because even though we wanted to engage with them as a community group, that was quite difficult. Also, if I wanted to engage with them as an artist, that was also difficult. It was only when we fast forward to beginning of the City of

Culture application in 2017, that they opened the door for me as an artist. The experience of being a migrant artist at Coventry University was also very difficult. First, as a migrant artist who was also dealing with personal issues, I could not engage with a lot of things. Second, the opportunities were not there, they were not coming up. The other students from outside of the UK in my cohort also felt left out. That is when I started fully engaging and trying to find out what is going on. There was a lot of lack of engagement, there was a lack of real understanding of me as a migrant because of my way of thinking. It was very clear I was different from the other students' way of thinking and working. There was a lack of support and actual understanding of what it actually means to be a student from a migrant background or a mature student who has other responsibilities.

CR

Picking up on that point about the support structure. I wanted to ask you in relation to Maokwo, how easy did you find the collaboration with other organisations in Coventry and the support from the cultural network in the city? We understand the cultural ecology of a city will be made of different tiers of organisations or different institutions supporting culture, like Coventry University. The university is a key stakeholder in the city and tries to have an active civic role, not least, in big initiatives like the city of culture in 2021. However, we could argue that there is key work devised and delivered by much smaller organisations. Arguably a healthy ecology benefits from diverse approaches to the cultural offer and from establishing an active collaboration between different institutions and active sharing of resources. How did you find the support of bigger institutions to organisations such as Maokwo in Coventry?

LN

I think I would say it has got two faces. It has required a lot of hard work. On one hand, it has been useful. For instance, back when we were a community group, we wanted to work with the Herbert [Art Gallery and Museum]. We tried multiple times to work with them but there was no response or engagement, Even when Gogo tried, who is incredibly engaging and persistent, the response never came. Then, when we registered as Maokwo in 2017, we tried to work with them again. Again nothing happened. We have numerous examples of us trying to reach out to this organisation, and nothing happened until after George Floyd's death. This is also the time when Maokwo was gaining visibility because of the City of Culture [Coventry, 2021]. We had nearly a year long conversation, talking about how we can potentially work together. By that time, I was under the understanding that they knew our values and what we are about. We were very clear about our past attempts to engage with them. We were very clear in terms of the challenges, and we were also clear about how we want to work, being aware of potential tokenism. We wanted this to be a genuine relationship.

We laid everything on the table and they seemed to have some sort of understanding. But little did we know that the agendas of big institutions versus a smaller organisation keeps creeping up. The partnership that we got into, it ended up being very traumatic for us, up to now. It is a problem, and a situation that we are still working to resolve to find ways of how we can move forward. It left a big dent on us.

This is just one example of how this has played out for us. It was quite clear that they knew what we could bring to the table. They saw something that is valuable to whatever it is that they are doing, that will add on to their applications or will tick their boxes. There is this play of big organisations

coming in to extract the value that we have. This value can potentially bring in very big changes if we genuinely come together with them in a fair way. It can potentially bring in truly impactful change. Unfortunately, what we have now learnt is that big organisations come in and then they always go to the default colonial way of working. There is real need to bash the system or their ways of working which is something that they are not willing to do. When this situation happened, I had to fight to bring in someone who is a mediator because they did not see the reason to do so.

CR

Did it improve with the help of the mediator?

LN

Now, we have had the report back from the mediator with suggestions. They are identifying where things could have gone wrong and suggestions as to what we do moving forward. The next step is for me to go back to the Herbert for another conversation to look at the suggestions together. There are some thoughts around trauma-based learning to look at how their work with people from minority groups.

However, our young people are suggesting that the Herbert just dismantles the way that they work. Because without decolonising their method of working, nothing else can be done. As much as we can come in and bring in all these suggestions, it will not help, because their way of working is their way of working.

CR

In the backdrop of this experience was what happened with the Coventry Biennial in 2022, where participating artist Melissandre Varin withdrew from the show followed by an open letter exposing the way they have been treated by the organisation.

PG

Can I ask about what you might mean by dismantling? Do you mean that we need to get rid of the curators or the structures that are there? Or is it that they can make certain changes that would help to make it better? What do you mean by this mentality?

LN

I mean the mentality, like the way of thinking. There are two layers to it, I would say. There is a certain way of thinking that is very generational. I have a certain way of thinking that is very much connected to my roots, connected to how I was raised in the environment that I was raised in, which influences how I go about doing things. Similarly, these institutions have their certain way of thinking, which is very colonial-led, where the moment that they see me in the room that way of thinking is still there. This way of thinking goes beyond the EDI policies. How do you dismantle this way of thinking? As we have seen in this project, institutions also do not have enough staff and time. This adds to the problem. It is very hard to introduce a new way of working, let alone to change mentalities. But their way of working is one where one is invited to work like that and like that only. The mindsets, methods and systems get in the way.

PG

This is such a clear analysis of what the problem is, and the diagnosis of the problem is the colonial model. Also, the point about extraction is very important. The way they relate to the community is to extract value, which they have not contributed to, and that the community have fought hard for without the support of institutions in their hour of need. After George Floyd, institutions want to then come and reap that harvest without putting the work in, in a completely colonial model. If I were them, I would hire you to dismantle

that mindset. What you have outlined is for me, a clear diagnosis of what the problem is at the Herbert and the first step to solve it.

We will make sure to include these points in the recommendations. They absolutely accord with my understanding of how the Herbert works and has worked. The thing is, when you get into this point about dismantling systems, the people that are working in these organisations feel very threatened for good reason, because it is their livelihood, they have got mortgages, they have got children. For this reason, any sense of a critique, any sense of having to change that, could lead to them feeling like a personal attack is also damaging. This feeling goes from the curators right to the very top of the organisation.

Institutions find it easier to bring in Black curators to do the work. That is not fit for purpose, it does not address the real issues, and it needs to be called out.

CR

To follow-up, it is clear that the work that needs doing is not hiring someone to do the community work for the institutions. Instead, it is to look at the very structures of the organisation, including staff, 'the business as usual' attitude of these organisations and address it with the responsibility and seriousness that it deserves. This kind of work might look, at the first glance, invisible to the public eye, because it needs to first work within the inside of the foundations of these organisations.

One of the questions we have is around the role of smaller organisations within these contexts. After four years of working with Maokwo, what are the benefits of working for a smaller organisation? We see the contribution of smaller organisations as leading the way and putting on the table the very

important questions. They tend to be more flexible, adaptable, responsible. Is this your experience too?

LN

On reflection, first, we went through a phase of finding a way to ground my work within the city. Back then, I did not understand the funding system because when we were doing our community group, it was Gogo mainly who was doing a lot of that work. So, as much as I used to think that it would have been helpful to have funding when we were starting up, I then came to a point of realising that it was actually a blessing that we did not have that. It helped us to strengthen our identity without conforming to the funding criteria. Although we did not have that support, we were being responsive to the problems that were right in front of us. This kind of response then attracted especially young people that we have been on a journey with ever since. They saw something that they liked, and I think it was the responsiveness. An example, there was a woman who came from Uganda and used to do some sewing. When there was a small opportunity, we bought a sewing machine. To put in what was missing. We have acted it out in the past and it is now our way of addressing the issues. It has been a journey of learning how to put in what is missing for the people we are supporting. What has been useful is that this natural response has now become the model of how we work as an organisation.

CR

It is very interesting your point about funding-- it is a double edge sword. We all appreciate the limitations of not having funding, and you are not advocating for non-funding, but you do highlight how funding schemes define the priorities without knowing what is actually missing on the ground. This detachment creates significant issues

within organisations because to survive they need to comply with priorities set up elsewhere and out of touch with the real needs. I also appreciate that idea around how funding can be limiting in a rapidly changing landscape. Many thanks for your time and contribution to these debates.

PG

It was a great interview, so much clarity, especially around what the problem is and how to solve it. Thank you very much and congratulations on your work.



# Sylvia Theuri

Sylvia Theuri is an art educator, researcher, and independent curator. She is a working group member for this project, and currently a lecturer in Contextual Fine Art and Photography at the University of Wolverhampton.

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Carolina Rito

Although you have been a part of this project since the beginning as a working group member, our conversations started before this. These conversations were happening at least since we were putting together this project's proposal and while you were preparing your exhibition at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in 2020 [*Thirteen Ways of Looking* exhibition included work by Keith Piper, Eddie Chambers, Donald Rodney, among others]. Now, at the time of this interview [March 2023], you are co-curating a show at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery with curator Ian Sergeant on the legacy of the Blk Art Group. Your experience with local organisations is vast. Our first question is about the performance of these organisations in the last three years. How do you see their efforts to acknowledge some of the systemic issues presented and represented by these organisations?

Sylvia Theuri

I am more familiar with the Herbert and Wolverhampton Art Gallery as we have worked together. My experience at the

Herbert is that whilst they are engaging with the issue, as with all organisations, there is always more work to be done. My experience so far at Wolverhampton is that they know there is a lot of work to be done and they are open to this work. It is not perfect, but this is acknowledged.

CR

From what you have seen and from your experience, are there any recommendations?

ST

I think all organisations need to be aware that this is a long-term process. As we have discussed many times, it is also about a behind-the-scenes work that staff need to be doing on a regular basis in terms of understanding how they are doing on antiracism work. Staff need to be prompted to ask: What is the work being done internally? If they are a white person, how are they engaging with this? What is their process that they are going through? What education are they receiving and how are they committed to doing the



ongoing work? It should not be all about public programming and delivery of exhibitions. There should be time set aside to actually sit and think through biases and where you are coming from. Unfortunately, that is usually where the work is not happening. The priority should start with the work behind the scenes. For instance, the Wellcome Collection released a statement where they expose the colonial roots of their history and collection and put forward ways to tackle the injustices in it. They have admitted and apologised for not having done the work, for having failed to meet their original commitments to implement antiracism practice. They admit how their action and inaction have perpetuated and exacerbated systemic racism within the wider research sector within which it operates.

Most institutions are not willing to admit and do it publicly. However, this really helps the process, to hold yourself accountable, make it accessible to anyone that can see it, so that in six-years' time, people can come and check for themselves. Ultimately, one can change board members, organise more exhibitions with artists of colour, or bring in staff, but if your structures and your systems do not also change, then those people are going to leave, be hurt and harmed. I think the question then is to ask how these local organisations can learn from some of these practices.

CR

Definitely. I believe that this process should come from a shift from 'look how well we are doing' to 'this is what we need to improve'. Also, to be able to identify those areas with staff is a starting point that then helps whatever work that your organisation needs to do.

ST

The other aspect I would like to mention is in terms of how organisations are archiving or keeping hold of what they have been doing. They do not tend to

archive the work they do well enough. There should be a policy in place of archiving also to avoid replicating the same thing repeatedly. In relation to systemic racism, each time something happens it is as if it is a new thing. But it is not new. It has been decades long. If an archiving policy is not in place, it constantly feels like you are reinventing the wheel or doing this new thing. We need to be thinking about how we keep the legacy so that we can actually move forward rather than keep repeating the same thing over and over again.

The organisations' websites or their digital spaces should reflect the work. These spaces tend to be archaic and not transparent. Things need to be publicly accessible.

CR

In relation to the exhibition at Wolverhampton, are you already working on that aspect of the archive to ensure that it is recorded and sits somewhere in the institution's public archive?

ST

We have had the conversation, we have communicated the importance of archiving, of documenting. In addition, we have managed to secure some funding to support the exhibition, to ensure that we get proper documentation of everything. As with every organisation that I have worked at, there are four people doing the job of 20, which is unfortunate for all involved. This also adds to the issue. There is usually nobody that has the time to fully commit to ensuring these things happen, even if they want to. Who is available to ensure that these things happen? Who has the capacity and expertise to do this?

Ian and I and the Blk Art Research Group Project are thinking through how we are going to ensure that this work is accessible beyond what's happening

with the exhibition and the public programme.

CR

In comparison, how do you think that smaller organisations are doing? Are any examples you would like to highlight?

ST

The one that comes to mind is Ort Gallery in Birmingham<sup>1</sup>. They seem to have lost their venue, but they were based in a neighbourhood with South Asian communities, who were at the heart of that organisation. They do a lot of work on how to support artists and artists of colour and from disadvantaged backgrounds, but from a position of being a caring space. They ask what an organisation like that would look like. It is interesting that the white woman who led it has then stepped back to allow others to lead and to learn from others. It was a community space in the middle of the neighbourhood. They were quite a good model, a much smaller organisation trying to do that work and thinking about what they were doing and continuously critiquing and questioning their practices. There is also Maia, in Birmingham.

However, these smaller organisations bring up the question of funding. Are they receiving enough funding for their work to keep happening? Or how can these larger institutions work with the smaller ones to ensure that the work continues to be supported or does not have to continuously be rethought.

In London, there was a small gallery space called Home, which is also exhibiting work of people of colour. However, they have also said that they cannot keep the space where they are

anymore. One is constantly seeing these small organisations not able to sustain themselves or have to keep rethinking it. However, they are the ones that are doing the work that the larger organisations need to replicate or at least learn from.

Paul Goodwin

How do you, as curators, relate to the history of Black curation? What do you think are some of the most significant moments in our history generally, and also how it relates to the region?

ST

It has been really important to me, just as an individual, as a Black person, to have seen from as far back as my undergraduate degree that it was possible. The experience of someone in the arts is that you start your studies at university without a clue about Black art. I see it with my students when they come in at Wolverhampton University, after GCSE and A level, maybe, even a foundation course. They are often hearing about the Black Art Movement, Black art or Black British artists for the first time at university. That is when they realise that this history has existed, and not just in the 1980s, but also the 1970s and 1960s, et cetera. It is really shocking. I can relate to that experience because the same thing happened to me. I was aware of Black artists from the US, but not Black British artists. Hearing about Black British artists in many ways has been inspiring and reassuring. I should be here, and I can be here.

In terms of significant moments or events, I was just thinking about the *Black Art An'Done* exhibition, the first exhibition by the Blk Art Group within

1 'Ort Gallery'. n.d. Ort Gallery. Accessed 28 April 2023. <https://ortgallery.co.uk>

an institution (Wolverhampton Art Gallery, 1981). However, it is a shame, coming back to what we were talking about before, that there does not exist a way in which the correspondence around this exhibition is available. The archive at Wolverhampton has a lot of gaps. Conversely, Coventry [The Herbert Gallery] has done a great job of archiving most of the correspondence, ephemera and more from the *Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition of 1983. It is a shame that Wolverhampton did not manage to do the same for the 1981 exhibition, because I think it would have been interesting to think about how that first exhibition came to be. The communication, the correspondence, all of that. From the Herbert's archive, you can get a sense of how Eddie Chambers and the others were working, what they were interested in, and how they were articulating themselves. Especially the confidence they had to engage with institutions and say 'this is what we want, this is what we need'. It is really interesting to see the kind of thinking behind the whole event, not just thinking about exhibiting the work, but also thinking about the public programme.

As regards more contemporary initiatives, whilst they are not based in the Midlands region, I would really like to mention Black Blossoms that was founded by curator and educator Bolanle Tajudeen in 2015 and has been supporting Black women artists throughout the UK. I think what Bolanle is doing is powerful and in line with what the BIK Art Group did in the 1980s. They are not only building community, they are also networking. They are thinking about the digital spaces, they are thinking about social media, they are thinking about archive. The Black Blossoms have got their website, their journals, an art school. They invite people to teach with them without having to have a degree. One does not need to come with all these things that institutions insist you must have

before you can deliver something. Black Blossoms is so open that somebody can come and say, 'this is what I am interested in, let us make it happen'.

They are also working with schools; they are placing work in public spaces; they are putting work on billboards; they are going to shopping centres; they are doing art on the underground. I think that a lot of organisations can learn from Black Blossoms' model in terms of how they are working. It is the generation Z way of working, and I think that that is what a lot of institutions are missing. They are not tapping into the younger people's way of thinking.

This gap is definitely something that organisations need to pick up on. This is something I have been saying for a while. This is how I want to think about curating, the legacy, the archive. We need to find the balance between the work that goes into ensuring that there is the output and what remains after the event. After months of reading and putting things together and planning, after three months of exhibiting it is over. In five years, people cannot even find it online. It feels like we are just extracting from curators, extracting from artists, and not thinking about how we ensure that all this effort and energy does not just disappear into thin air.

#### CR

It can be incredibly temporary, and it seems like there is a growing imperative of the new, from funders, from the sector. It comes back to the point about time needed to ensure the longevity of the work. The time to archive and process, for staff to work on the knowledge collected and making it accessible, should be built into the exhibition timeline. The speed of curating and programming does not seem to be conducive to a more reflective practice and structural change.

# Recommendations and Reflections

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Asking how we care about the legacy of the Black Arts Movement in the UK today enables an investigation of the complex functions of cultural institutions in the production, validation, and dissemination of aesthetic standards. Similarly, to consider the attention paid to the legacy of the Black Arts Movement by the cultural organisations which helped promote it in the 1980s demonstrates how the canon of British art has been affected by this movement. Moreover, it shows how this canon has expanded and has generated a critique from within, making the system of validation expand its aesthetic limits and protocols. Through this project, we were interested in understanding how the care for the legacy of the Black Arts Movement had been transformed in the last three decades and, not least, in the last three years. We wanted to ask colleagues if the forms of caring had grown into a concern for systemic equality across the institutional functions, including its workforce, governance, programming, and audience development.

In this context, it was important to interrogate the perception that equality and change in the sector translate into more exhibitions with Black artists, and more participatory programmes with local communities. Our conversations were driven by the belief that change is when

British Black art does not mean diversity work but rather simply British (Black) art. As Rasheed Araeen comments in the preface to the exhibition *Essential Black Art* in 1988, the term 'Black Art' is usually misused to refer to the work of Black artists, with an implication that their work should necessarily be different from the mainstream. Instead, according to Araeen, Black Art is an aesthetic category used to refer to 'a specific contemporary art practice that has emerged directly from the struggle of Asian, African and the Caribbean people (i.e black people) against racism and the work itself specifically deals with and expresses a "human condition"'.<sup>1</sup> In this context, the question we should be asking is how Black art has helped society acknowledge the issues around systemic racism and unconscious bias present in British society.<sup>2</sup> Have institutions learned from those lessons and implemented it?

While we had initiated the conversations about this project before the tragic death of George Floyd and the re-emergence of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, the questions we were asking only grew in relevance; these events have shed a renewed light on the questions we were asking. We could argue that in the last three years there has been some significant change in how institutions recognise, address and articulate questions about diversity and inclusion. Much of what was done was thanks to the demands to decolonise the museums and galleries and the demands for institutions to act against inequality. However, throughout this project, we noticed institutions taking a

1 Araeen, Rasheed. 1988. 'Essential Black Art'. Chisenhale Gallery. 1988. <https://bit.ly/3pT7Cdi>

2 At the same time, it is important to note that Black Art is a generative, if contested category. Its significance extends way beyond instrumentalised questions about systemic racism and unconscious bias in society. See Darby English's critique of reductionist notions of Black art in his important text *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. English, Darby. 2007. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

reactive approach instead of a more considered one where they do the work of understanding the ‘why’s’ and ‘how’s’ that respond to their situation. More recently, it became apparent that the measures and schemes to support a fairer sector have gradually eroded. For these reasons, it is important to continue assessing how institutions respond, the external constraints to change, and how to make sure that the sector is responding to the current challenges.

The conversations we have held as part of this project – most of them already underway before the project started – had looked at the complexity of the current context and the need to actualise the functions of cultural organisations in line with the current challenges and demands. This document brings together the main areas of intervention at an institutional and funding structures’ level. We have also identified an area of work that aims to generate a critical infrastructure devised and delivered by cultural institutions that allows them to be self-reflective and carve out the time for staff and audiences to develop a thought-provoking context for critical practices and thinking. This document shows the challenges and recommendations collected throughout the project along with practical ways to address these areas going forward.

## Challenges and Areas of Intervention

### **Institutional Structures**

This section identified challenges at the level of the organisational structure.

### Diversity Work as Add-on

It is common to see cultural programming designed to attract underrepresented groups within cultural institutions. However, these activities tend to sit within a specific department of the organisation (e.g., learning departments) and/or be the responsibility of a small team or one individual (e.g., engagement curator). The segregation of the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion agenda (commonly referred to as EDI) seems to perceive the work against systemic racism as an add-on to the core activities of the organisation.

### Ephemeral relationships

When the work with local groups relies on the efforts of one employee or a small group of employees, the relationships with local communities can become vulnerable and be frequently disrupted. Triggered by low salaries and casual work conditions, the turnover of staff to a different position in the organisation or to a new institution creates a gap between the relationships developed by these individuals and the local groups. The diversity work is often supported by short-term grants for which new staff members are employed for the duration of the project. The precarity of community work affects the way these groups relate to the institution and dents their sense of trust in them.

### Partition of 'change' from wider social contexts

There is a general perception that equality, diversity, and inclusion are areas of work within cultural organisations instead of a systemic approach to racially biased structures within society at large, in which institutions play a significant role. Segregating the diversity agenda – usually in the learning department or as the responsibility of a community engagement curator – is not conducive to the structural changes required to promote a cultural scene beyond racial divides. Moreover, these pieces of work are frequently funded by short-term one-off funding streams. The changes need to be implemented across the organisation in a systematic way affecting all areas of its workings. The work should be implemented at the level of the board of trustees, recruitment, staff development, curatorial programme, and audience development.

### Incomplete archives

Cultural activities should be documented, archived, and accessible to the public. Although there have been efforts to systemise the archiving of the projects and activities organised, there has been an inconsistent approach to archiving. It is important that organisations acknowledge their responsibility in keeping an archive of their activities accessible to the public. Significantly, the work of Black and Global Majority archivists, documentarians, and researchers is often side-lined and ignored by many cultural institutions,



further undermining the depth and strength of how these archives serve their diverse publics.

## Funding Structures

This section includes challenges posed by funding structures external to the organisations with a considerable impact on the functioning of these organisations.

### Discontinuity of the funding

Funding structures tend to support individual projects instead of long-term processes. A project-by-project approach is not conducive to the implementation of a body of work that needs to be integral to the workings of the organisations, cross-departmental (from curatorial programming to marketing), and long-term. The discontinuity of funding affects three main areas: staff structure, audience's perception and engagement, and programming.

- Staff Structure

The project's funding is usually used to grow capacity and recruit new staff. The new staff members have a temporary contract for the duration of the project only, as institutions tend to have difficulties in securing further work for occasional staff. The work done by these individuals relies on personal relationships and building trustworthy relationships. However, once these individuals leave the organisation, these relationships and networks are interrupted.

- Audience's perception and engagement

At the level of audiences, the transitory staff situation affects audience's trust in the institutions as the relationship is built by one individual or a small group. This also increases the risks of tokenism.

- Curatorial programme

The curatorial programme approaches diversity as a topic and comes and goes depending on funding. The project-by-project approach compromises the continuity, quality and depth of the work done. Moreover, it puts the work developed in jeopardy after funds are terminated and staff leaves. Arguably, a project-by-project programming is more

prone to a tokenist approach, where outcomes need to be demonstrated to justify the funds.

### External Funding Dependency

The funding question and challenges go beyond the nature of this project. The survival of institutions is more and more dependent on external funding and income generation. Having to apply for extra sums of money to fund the on-going programme – not additional programme – is becoming a common practice. For this reason, development teams have increased whereas curatorial teams have gone the opposite way. Depending on external funding for survival puts an enormous pressure on institutions that need to meet the funders' criteria (which may well diverge from the institutions' priorities) and put resources aside for the funding process, or else they risk not being successful and losing the resources invested. In addition, it compromises the stability of the work in progress and generates a sense of uncertainty that affects the whole organisation and not least staff. The funding challenges put institutions under unnecessary pressure and compromise long-term approaches to fundamental changes.

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### **Critical Infrastructures**

In the last three years, questions around the coloniality of institutions of display have been part of the demands for a more equitable sector. What these demands highlighted was not only the need to decolonise the canon, but, more importantly, to come to terms with the ties between the foundations of exhibitionary practices and colonialism. The birth of museums in the nineteenth century was instrumental for the consolidation of the colonial project to establish European superiority over other cultures across the world. Artefacts, most of the times illegally brought to Europe from colonial territories, are made public in museums of natural history, ethnography, archaeology, and art. Issues related to the restitution of collection items, to funders' ties to the slave trade, and the legitimacy of guardianship have been under discussion. Cultural organisations need to address these complex questions and actualise the role of their organisations accordingly.

The work expected from cultural organisations today goes beyond cosmetic changes. An in-depth understanding of the role of these organisations today is essential. The work that needs doing requires a structural change which in turn requires organisations to think through their real purpose and role. Given the issues identified above with regards to the time pressure, the external funding dependence, and the casual work, institutions have difficulty finding the time to reflect on the work done, ask questions, and rehearse answers. These discussions happen not only internally with staff, but also between them and their audiences. Moreover, the imperative to deliver public facing outputs that governs the sector makes it difficult for organisations to argue for resources needed to support the active investment in a critical infrastructure. A clear consequence is the lack of expertise in key topical areas such as decolonial practices and studies, and Black studies. It is important to create robust research-informed culture, to move away from a reactive culture and, instead, stimulate a pondered one.

## Recommendations

### Institutional Structures

- Provide training for all staff on equality, decolonial practices and critical thinking.<sup>3</sup>
- Implement the EDI agenda across the organisation including board of trustees.
- Establish a set of institutional values that are specific to your organisation, identify how the values would impact your work and what an institution that stands by those values would look like.

3 Mohdin, Aamna. 2023. 'Unconscious Bias Training Is "Nonsense", Says Outgoing Race Relations Chair'. The Guardian, 18 February 2023, sec. World news. <https://bit.ly/45eOqa4>

- Establish a tenure of no more than five years for directors and no more than two years for board of trustees. This allows rotation at the senior management and board level necessary for the renewal of ideas and to expand the networks.
- Diversify the points of contact with local communities to avoid the relationship being impacted by staff turnover.
- Strengthen archival practices and its relationships to communities and artists by engaging more with Black archival practices and practitioners.<sup>4</sup>

### Funding Structures

- Encourage more long-term grants that allow structural change and long-term investment.
- Promote funding opportunities to create critical infrastructures instead of output-focus.
- Create funding opportunities where priorities are established by the organisations.

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### Critical Infrastructures

- Create a critical infrastructure based on closed-door activities, incentives, and public programming focusing on the developing of a critical platform to interrogate the function of the organisation, the current challenges, and to design practical ways to tackle the issues.
- Establish collaborative research programmes with

4 Ishmael, Hannah, Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski, Kelly Foster, Etienne Joseph, and Nathan E. Richards. 2020. 'Locating the Black Archive'. In *Communities, Archives and New Collaborative Practices*, edited by Simon Popple, Andrew Prescott, and Daniel Mutibwa, 207–18. Bristol University Press.

universities and researchers.

The project also identified understudied research areas to complement research in the field. These topics include but are not limited to:

- The genealogies of black curation
- The effects of the pandemic on the EDI agenda
- The post-BLM protests in policy and business as usual institutional approach
- How to decolonialise the collection?
- Critical Black instituting practices

# Partner Organisations Recommendations

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## The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum

01. Funders need to be less prescriptive around outcomes of projects to allow them to flex to meet the needs/ expectations of partners. This would allow for a more innovative and risk-taking approach.
02. The sector needs to consider its recruitment processes and job requirements to open up opportunities to a more diverse range of candidates.

## New Art Exchange

01. Increase Funding for EDI Initiatives: Funding bodies should allocate more resources towards supporting EDI initiatives within the cultural sector. This includes funding outreach programmes, training and development programmes for people or artists with protected characteristics, and increased support for underrepresented artists and organisations.
02. Foster Collaborative Partnerships: Funders should

allow for more collaboration between partners and be less prescriptive around project outcomes. This would encourage a more innovative and risk-taking approach and provide opportunities for diverse voices and perspectives to be included in decision-making processes.

03. **Address Recruitment Bias:** The cultural sector needs to examine and modify its recruitment processes and job requirements to create more opportunities for people with protected characteristics. This includes removing barriers to entry, such as underpaid internships or requiring formal qualifications, and actively seeking out diverse candidates through outreach and targeted recruitment efforts.

04. **Prioritise Equity in Programming:** Cultural organisations should prioritise equity and inclusion in their programming decisions by actively seeking out and presenting work from artists and communities with protected characteristics. This requires a citizen-led approach, involving seeking input and collaboration from people with protected characteristics and their communities, to create more inclusive and representative programming.

05. **Promote Citizen Leadership:** The cultural sector should promote and support more citizen leadership, particularly from people with protected characteristics. This includes offering training and resources to support leadership development, creating more opportunities for citizen-led programming and decision-making, and prioritising the involvement of citizens with protected characteristics in key sector bodies and decision-making processes.

### Wolverhampton Art Gallery

01. Useful advice and reference sources can be found in *Doing the Work*, published by UAL Decolonising Institute and The Contemporary Art Society: <https://contemporaryartsociety.org/members/national-network/work-anti-racism-decolonisation-museum-practice/>





# Biographies

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# Paul Goodwin

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Paul Goodwin is a curator, researcher, and urban theorist based in London. Goodwin's research and curatorial interests span the fields of transnational art, urbanism, and curatorial practice with a focus on African diaspora art and visual cultures. He is Co-Lead Investigator for Worlding Public Cultures: The Arts and Social Innovation an international research project funded by the Trans-Atlantic Platform for Social and Human Sciences (T-AP). The project explores the potential for critical approaches to pedagogical and curatorial innovation as a response to aggressive globalisation and populisms with an international consortium of universities and museums including: University of the Arts London, Carleton, Concordia, Heidelberg and Amsterdam Universities and Tate Modern, Dutch National Museum of World Cultures, Dresden State Art Museums and National Gallery of Canada. Goodwin's recent curatorial projects include: *W.E.B. Du Bois Charting Black Lives* (House of Illustration, London, UK, Nov. 2019), *We Will Walk: Art and Resistance from the American South* (Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK, Feb. 2020) and *Untitled: Art on the Conditions of Our Time, Chapter 2* (Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK, May 2020). Goodwin is Professor and Chair of Contemporary Art & Urbanism and Director of the Research Centre for Transnational Art, Identity & Nation (TrAIN) at University of the Arts London.



# Shaheen Merali

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Shaheen Merali (born in Tanzania, lives in Britain) is a curator, critic, and artist of Asian heritage. Merali began his artistic practice in the 1980s, committing to social, political, and personal narratives. He is currently a PhD candidate at Coventry University. Merali was the curator for the inaugural Uganda Pavilion, *Radiance – They Dream in Time* (2022) for the 59th Venice Biennale. The pavilion was presented the Golden Lion special mention award. He was the co-curator of *Berlin Heist or the Enduring Fascination of Walled Cities*, 4th Mediations Biennale, Posnan, (2014) and co-curator of the 6th Gwangju Biennale, Korea (2006). Merali was the Head of Department of Exhibition, Film and New Media at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2003-2008) where he curated *The Black Atlantic, and Re-Imagining Asia, One Thousand years of Separation*. In 1988, Merali co-founded the Panchayat Arts Education Resource Unit, now donated to the Tate Library.



Photo courtesy  
of Peter Putz

# Laura Nyahuye

Laura Nyahuye is a creative visionary, artist, and founder and CEO of Maokwo – a migrant-led organisation using art as a form of activism to bring about positive change. It advocates for better inclusion across the cultural sector, increasing visibility of migrant artists and using its platform to influence policy and generate opportunities for underrepresented creatives working in visual and performing arts. A commitment to women, community engagement, championing unheard voices, minoritised artists, tackling discrimination and disadvantage is at the very heart of Maokwo's mission. Beyond using art as a tool for representation, Maokwo creates safe spaces and platforms, and lasting pathways of opportunity for minoritised groups. They provide skills development, volunteering, employment, mentoring and training opportunities for young and mature minoritised creative professionals in areas such as exhibiting, producing, research, curation, production and marketing and so forth. Maokwo delivers, facilitates, and consults with legacy in mind. They are creating a global reach and impact. Working in collaboration with higher education institutions, universities, schools, galleries, theatres, and a wide range of community-based organisations.

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# Carolina Rito

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Carolina Rito is Professor of Creative Practice Research, at the Research Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities (CAMC), at Coventry University; and leads the centre's Critical Practices research strand. Carolina is Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands project (2021-2023). She is a researcher and curator whose work explores 'the curatorial' as an investigative practice, expanding practice-based research in the fields of curating, visual arts, visual cultures, and cultural studies. Rito is European Artistic Research Network Curatorial Studies Working Group member; Research Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary History (IHC), Universidade NOVA de Lisboa; Founding Editor of The Contemporary Journal; and Chair for the Collaborative Research Working Group for the MHECF. Rito is the co-editor of *Institution as Praxis – New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research* (Sternberg, 2020), *Architectures of Education* (e-flux Architecture, 2020), and *FABRICATING PUBLICS: the Dissemination of Culture in the Post-Truth Era* (Open Humanities Press, forthcoming). She was Head of Public Programmes and Research at Nottingham Contemporary, leading the institution's research strategy with Nottingham Trent University and University of Nottingham. She holds a PhD in

Curatorial/Knowledge from Goldsmiths, University of London, where she taught from 2014 to 2016.



# Ian Sergeant

Dr Ian Sergeant is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with Transforming Collections: Reimagining Art, Nation and Heritage, University of the Arts London. He is also a curator for Coventry Biennial. He has an MA in Contemporary Curatorial Practice, School of Art, Birmingham City University. In 2022, he completed his practice-based PhD *Visual Representations and Cultural (Re) Constructions of Black British Masculinities in 21st Century Birmingham*, at Birmingham City University. Curated exhibitions, projects and events include *Reimagining Donald Rodney* at Vivid Projects (2016), *Donald Rodney at Celine Gallery*, Glasgow International (2021), Cut & Mix, New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2021), *Interference:s*, Coventry Biennial (2021), *Nation's Finest, Putting Down Roots and Birthing*, Birmingham 2022 Festival (2022), *The more things change...*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2023). He is a director of performing and visual arts organisation Kalaboration CiC and on the board of directors for Vivid Projects, a non-profit company supporting media arts practice. He is also a member of the Blk Art Group Research Project set up by former Blk Art Group members Claudette Johnson, Marlene Smith, and Keith Piper in 2011.

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Photo courtesy  
of Marcin Sz

# Marlene Smith

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Marlene Smith (b. 1964, Birmingham, UK) is an artist and curator, and one of the founding members of Blk Art Group. She graduated from Bradford School of Art with a BA in Art & Design in 1987. She is currently Leader: Black British Art Research Group/British Art Network, a Tate initiative. She was co-curator for *Nations's Finest, Putting Down Roots & Birthing* (2021-2022) and associate: *Making Histories Visible* archive at UCLAN, (University of Central Lancashire), Preston, (2017 – 2020); UK Research Manager for Black Artists and Modernism, University of the Arts London (2015 -2017) and Director of Public Gallery, West Bromwich (2001 -2009). Since 2017, Smith has been an associate artist at Modern Art Oxford. Selected exhibitions include: *Black Art Collection Highlights*, Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2022); *Cut & Mix*, New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2022); *Portals*, East Side Projects, Birmingham; *Get Up, Stand Up, Now: Generations of Black Creative Pioneers*, Somerset House, London (2019); *The Place is Here*, Nottingham Contemporary and South London Gallery (2017); *Thinking Back: A Montage of Black Art in Britain*, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands (2016); and *Blood: Who Am I Gallery*, Science Museum, Longon (2011).





# Sylvia Theuri

Sylvia Theuri is an art educator, researcher, and independent curator. She holds a PhD from the University of Salford, which focused on Black African students' experiences of higher education art and design. She is currently a lecturer in Contextual Fine Art and Photography at the University of Wolverhampton. Her recent publications include: *From Institutional Racism to Duties of Care: Moving Interventionist Practices away from Racism and Colonial Dominance* commissioned by UAL Decolonising Arts Institute and the Contemporary Art Society (2022); 'Who Belongs in Art school?' in K. McMillan *Representation of Women Artists in Britain During 2020*, Freelands Foundation (2021). Sylvia was Research Lead for the Runnymede Trust's research project *Visualise: Race, Inclusion in Art Education* commissioned by the Freelands Foundation (August 2021 – January 2022), curator in residence at The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum (2019-2020), in partnership with New Art West Midlands, International Curators Forum and Coventry Biennial. Her residency culminated in the exhibition *Thirteen Ways of Looking* at The Herbert, 2020. She is on the board of directors for Talking Birds Theatre company and is part of the advisory group for ICF (International Curators Forum).

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# Partner Organisations Profiles

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## The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum

The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum is a key tourist attraction within the city's Cathedral Quarter, positioned beside Coventry's iconic Cathedral as well as the restored medieval buildings of St Mary's Guildhall and the Regency period Drapers Hall. It is in close proximity to Coventry University's Faculty of Arts, where artists of the BLK Group studied fine art during the 1980s. The museum attracts around 110,000 visitors each year. In 2020 the museum had a significant capital investment in preparation for hosting the Turner Prize as part of City of Culture 2021.

The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum first opened in 1960, built on land acquired by Coventry City Council and paid for by Coventry industrialist and philanthropist Alfred Herbert. In 2008 a £14m extension opened, which included a new entrance from Bayley Lane, an impressive glass covered court connecting the museum to Coventry Archives, new café, shop, education and digital media suite, additional temporary exhibition space and conservation studio. The museum's first director, John Hewitt, started a collection of British life and landscape, which includes work by Joan Eardley, Stanley Spencer, Carel Weight, Paul Nash, and one of LS Lowry's finest landscapes. The visual arts collections also include contemporary art on the theme of peace and reconciliation, addressing an important civic theme within Coventry.

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**Herbert**  
Art Gallery & Museum

## New Art Exchange

New Art Exchange is the biggest Contemporary Visual Art gallery in the UK that is dedicated to artists and communities from the Global Ethnic Majority. We are based in the Heart of Hyson Green, a community just outside Nottingham city centre which is culturally rich and vibrant. We deliver a variety of exhibitions, artist residencies, public events, workshops, performances, festivals, neighbourhood programmes and young people initiatives.

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NEW ART EXCHANGE

## Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Wolverhampton Art Gallery, built in 1884, holds over 18,000 items in its collections, which represent over three hundred years of art, craft, and social history. It has the largest collection of British and American Pop art outside of London, along with significant artworks relating the Troubles of Northern Ireland and the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s and 90s. The Gallery hosts a wide variety of touring and in-house exhibitions and runs a lively programme of events for families, schools, and the local community. Wolverhampton has one of the most diverse and multicultural populations in the UK, and the Arts and Culture service is committed to working with and representing the people who make the city what it is today. Wolverhampton Art Gallery is an ACE National Portfolio Organisation.

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The AHRC funded project, *The Role of Visual Arts Organisations in the British Black Arts Movement in the Midlands (2021-2023)* had brought together a small but curious group of individuals whose current research converges to examine a remarkable artistic community of both African and Asian ancestry who came to be known as the political Black artists. The project examined the role of the Midlands through exhibitions and funding resources in its regional galleries and museums in the early 1980s onwards.

The regular meetings and discussion with fellow artists, exhibition-makers, curators, and researchers were seminal in creating a collective memory of the importance of these curatorial and artistic endeavours. The case studies in the two meetings, dedicated to evaluating exhibition histories which involved institutional staff from three regional galleries, allowed the project to further consider the place of racial inequalities that often masked and sustained cultural exclusion. These types of discussions remain important to the further production of a counter-history of cultural democracy that existed at a time of contextual engagement through the lens of critical race theory. Throughout the period of this network orientated group, the discussions often returned to examine British Art History, especially in its inability to find new ways to address an artistic model outside of its traditional community, and the necessity to combat the paucity imposed by academic protocols, cultural dissonance, and funding management.

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